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"A WOMAN PERCHED ON A LADDER IN DEEP
CONVERSATION WITH A MAN
SEATED IN A TREE"

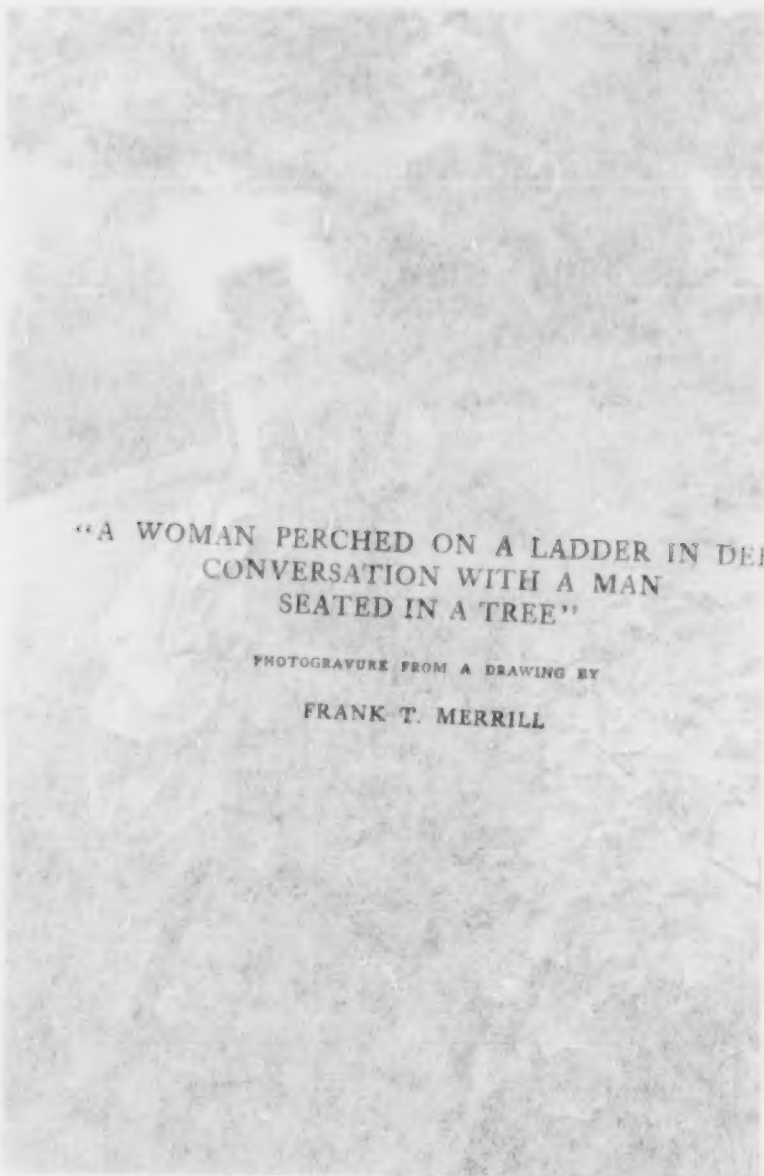
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FRANK T. MERRILL

Le Comte de Bragelonne

Volume II

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Royal Canadian Edition

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of
Alexandre Dumas



The Vicomte de Bragelonne
Volume II

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CAST OF CHARACTERS.

ANNE OF AUSTRIA, queen mother.
ARAMIS, successively Abbé d'Herblay, Bishop of Vannes,
General of the Order of Jesuits, and Duc d'Alaméda.
ARISTE, clerk of Brienne.
ARNOUX, M^{LLE.}, of the court.
ATHOS, Comte de la Fère.
BAISEMEAUX DE MONTLEZUN, DE, Governor of Bastille.
BAZIN, former lackey to Aramis.
BEAUFORT, DUC DE, grandson of Henri IV.
BELLIERE, MARQUISE ELISE DE, of the court.
BERNOUIN, valet to Cardinal Mazarin.
BERTAUDIERE No. 3, prison name of Philippe the Pretender.
BISCARRAT, GEORGES DE, officer of the King's Guards.
BLASOIS, servant of Athos.
BONSTETT, MEINHEER, Jesuit merchant of Bremen.
BRAGELONNE, RAOUL, VICOMTE DE, son of Athos.
BRETEUIL, colleague of Colbert.
BRIENNE, DE, secretary to Cardinal Mazarin.
BUCKINGHAM, GEORGE VILLIERS, DUKE OF, of the English
court.
CÉLESTIN, servant of Planchet.
CHALAIS, M^{LLE.} DE, of the court.
CHARLES II., King of England.
CHÂTILLON, M^{LLE.} DE, of the court.
CHEVREUSE, DUCHESSE DE, former confidante of Anne of
Austria; also known as Marie Michon.
COLBERT, JEAN-BAPTISTE, successively bursar to Cardinal
Mazarin, Intendant of Finance, and Prime Minister of
France.
CONDÉ, LOUIS DE BOURBON, PRINCE DE, of the royal house.
CONRART, friend of Fouquet.
CRÉQUY, M^{LLE.} DE, of the court.
CROPOLE, landlord of the Medici tavern.
CROPOLE, M^{ME.}, wife of foregoing.
DANGEAU, of the court.

- DANICAMP, servant of Fouquet.
D'ARTAGNAN, successively Lieutenant and Captain of the King's Musketeers, Count, and Marshal of France.
DESTOUCHES, aid to Colbert.
D'EYMERIS, farmer-general of revenue.
DIGBY, aid-de-camp to General Monk.
D'INFREVILLE, aid to Colbert.
D'ORLÉANS, GASTON, DUC, uncle of Louis XIV.
D'ORLÉANS, DUCHESSE, wife of foregoing.
D'ORLÉANS, PHILIPPE, DUC D'ANJOU ("Monsieur"), brother of Louis XIV.
D'ORLÉANS, DUCHESSE, HENRIETTA OF ENGLAND ("Madame"), wife of foregoing.
FAUCHEUX, goldsmith.
FORANT, aid to Colbert.
FOUQUET, NICOLAS, superintendent of finance.
FOUQUET, MME., wife of foregoing.
FOUQUET, ABBÉ, brother of Nicolas.
FRANÇOIS, servant of Baisemeaux.
FRIEDRICH, DE, officer of the Swiss Guards.
GECHTER, MME., housekeeper of Planchet.
GESVRES, DE, Captain of the King's Guards.
GÉTARD, architect.
GOENNEC, sailor.
GOURVILLE, friend of Fouquet.
GRAFFTON, MISS MARY, of the English court.
GRAMMONT, MARÉCHAL DE, of the court.
GRIMAUD, steward of Athos.
GRISART, Jesuit physician.
GUÉNAUD, physician to Mazarin.
GUICHE, COMTE DE, of the court.
HAVARD, colleague of Colbert.
HERREBIA, CARDINAL, Spanish Jesuit.
JUPENET, printer to Fouquet.
KÉROUALLE, LOUISE DE, afterwards Duchess of Portsmouth.
KEYSER, Dutch fisherman.
LAFAYETTE, MME. DE, of the court.
LA FONTAINE, JEAN DE, friend of Fouquet.
LAMBERT, English general.
LA MOLINA, Spanish nurse to Anne of Austria.
LA VALLIÈRE, Mlle. LOUISE DE LA BAUME LE BLANC DE, of the court.

- LE BRUN, painter to Fouquet.
 LE NÔTRE, architect to Fouquet.
 LETELLIER, MICHEL, minister of France.
 LORET, friend of Fouquet.
 LORRAINE, CHEVALIER DE, favorite of Philippe d'Orléans.
 LOUIS XIV., King of France.
 LYODOT, farmer-general of revenue.
 LYONNE, minister of France.
 MACCUMNOR, Scotch Jesuit.
 MALICORNE, friend of Manicamp.
 MANCINI, M^{LE}. HORTENSE DE, niece of Cardinal Mazarin.
 MANCINI, M^{LE}. MARIE DE, niece of Cardinal Mazarin.
 MANCINI, M^{LE}. OLYMPE DE, niece of Cardinal Mazarin.
 MANICAMP, friend of De Guiche.
 MARCHIALI, prison name of Philippe the Pretender.
 MARIA TERESA, Queen of France.
 MARIN, colleague of Colbert.
 MARINI, Venetian Jesuit.
 MAZARIN, GIULIO (JULES), CARDINAL, Prime Minister of France.
 MENNEVILLE, adventurer.
 MOLIERE, JEAN-BAPTISTE POQUELIN DE, friend of Fouquet.
 MONK, English general, afterwards Duke of Albemarle.
 MONTALAIS, M^{LE}. AURE DE, of the court.
 MONTESPAN, DE, of the court.
 MOTTEVILLE, M^{ME}. DE, of the court.
 MOUSQUETON, or MOUSTON, steward of Porthos.
 NAVAILLES, M^{ME}. DE, of the court.
 NORFOLK, DUKE OF, English admiral.
 OLIVAIN, lackey to the Vicomte de Bragelonne.
 PARRY, servant of Charles II.
 PELLISSON, or PÉLISSON, friend of Fouquet.
 PERCERIN, JEAN, tailor to the King.
 PHILIPPE (known also as Bertaudière No. 3, Marchiali, and The Iron Mask), twin brother of Louis XIV., and Pretender to the throne of France.
 PITTRINO, painter to Cropole.
 PLANCHET, former lackey to D'Artagnan; now grocer.
 PORTHOS, successively Baron du Vallon, de Bracieux, de Pierrefonds.
 PRESSIGNY, LOUIS CONSTANT DE, captain of the King's frigate "La Pomone."

RABAUD, lackey to D'Artagnan.
ROCHESTER, WILMOT, EARL OF, of the English court.
ROSE, secretary to Louis XIV.
SAINT-AIGNAN, COMTE DE, favorite of Louis XIV.
SAINT-MARS, DE, Governor of Ile de Saint-Marguerite.
SAINT-RÉMY, DE, steward to Gaston d'Orléans.
SAINT-RÉMY, MME. DE, wife of foregoing.
SELDON, prisoner of Bastille.
SOISSONS, COMTESSE DE, of the court.
STEWART, Miss, of the English court.
TOBY, servant of Fouquet.
TONNAY-CHARENTE, Mlle. ATHENAÏS DE, afterwards Mme. de Montespan, of the court.
VALENTINOIS, MME. DE, sister of De Guiche.
VALOT, physician to Louis XIV.
VANEL, successively counsellor in Parliament and Procureur Général.
VANEL, MME. MARGUERITE, wife of foregoing.
VANIN, farmer-general of revenue.
VATEL, steward to Fouquet.
VILLEROY, DE, of the court.
WARDER, VICOMTE DE, of the court.
WOSTPUR, BARON VON, German Jesuit.
YORK, JAMES, DUKE OF, brother of Charles II., of England.
YVES, sailor.

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THE VICOMTE DE BRAGELONNE.

VOLUME II.

CHAPTER I.

SWORD-THRUSTS IN THE WATER.

ON betaking himself to De Guiche, Raoul found the latter conversing with De Wardes and Manicamp. Since the adventure of the barricade, De Wardes had treated Raoul as a stranger. They acted as if there were nothing between them; in fact, they seemed to be unacquainted with each other.

As Raoul entered, De Guiche walked up to him, and as he grasped his friend's hand Raoul glanced rapidly at the two young men, hoping to read on their faces what was passing through their minds. De Wardes was cold and impenetrable; Manicamp seemed lost in the all-absorbing contemplation of the trimming of his dress. De Guiche led Raoul into an adjoining room, and made him sit down.

"How well you look!" said he.

"That is rather strange," replied Raoul, "for I am far from happy."

"It is with you, then, as with me, is it not, Raoul? Our love affairs are not making much progress."

"So much the better, so far as you are concerned, count; the worst news, the news that could make me saddest, would be good news."

"Oh, in that case do not distress yourself, for not only am I very unhappy, but what is more, I see others happy around me."

"That is something I do not understand," replied Raoul; "pray explain, my friend."

"You will soon learn. I have struggled in vain against the feeling you saw rise, grow, and take possession of me; I have

summoned all your advice as well as all my own strength; I have considered in every detail the unfortunate affair in which I have become entangled. I have sounded its depths, it is an abyss, I know; but never mind, I shall go my way."

"Madman! you cannot take another step without bringing about your ruin to-day, your death to-morrow."

"Come what may!"

"De Guiche!"

"I've done with reflections; listen."

"Oh, you think you will succeed; you believe that Madame will love you yet!"

"Raoul, I believe nothing; I hope, because hope exists in man, and because it lives in him until death."

"But even admitting that you obtain this longed-for happiness, you certainly are more surely lost than if you failed to obtain it."

"I beg you, Raoul, not to interrupt me any more; you will never convince me, for I tell you beforehand I do not wish to be convinced; I have gone too far to turn back; I have suffered so deeply that death would be a blessing to me. I no longer love to madness, Raoul, I am jealous to the point of perfect fury."

Raoul struck his hands together with a gesture resembling anger.

"Well?" said he.

"Well or ill, it matters little. This is what I claim from you, my friend, my brother. For three days Madame has been in the midst of wild gayety. The first day I dared not look at her; I hated her for not being as wretched as I was. The next day I could not lose sight of her; and she—yes, Raoul, I thought I noticed it—she looked at me, if not with pity, at least with some gentleness. But between her looks and mine a shadow intervenes. The smile of another calls forth her smile. Beside her horse there gallops constantly a horse which is not mine; in her ear vibrates unceasingly a caressing voice which is not my voice. For three days, Raoul, my head has been on fire; flames course through my veins. I must drive away that shadow; I must destroy that smile; I must silence that voice."

"You wish to kill Monsieur?" cried Raoul.

"No; I am not jealous of Monsieur; I am not jealous of the husband, I am jealous of the lover."

"Of the lover?"

"Have you not noticed it, you who once were so keensighted?"

"You are jealous of M. de Buckingham?"

"Deadly jealous!"

"Again?"

"Oh, this time the affair can easily be arranged between us: I have taken the initiative, and have sent him a note."

"You have written to him? It was you, then?"

"How do you know that?"

"I know because he told me. See," and he handed De Guiche the letter he had received almost at the same time as his own. De Guiche read it eagerly.

"He is a brave man; more than that, he is a gallant man," said he.

"Yes, certainly the duke is a gallant man. I need not ask if you wrote him in as pleasant terms."

"I will show you my letter when you have gone to him on my behalf."

"But that is well-nigh impossible."

"What is?"

"For me to go to him."

"Why so?"

"The duke, like you, consults me."

"Oh! you will give me the preference, I presume! Listen! this is what I beg you to say to his grace — it is very simple — that one of these days, to-day, to-morrow, the following day, any day, in fact, that suits him, I wish to meet him at Vincennes."

"Reflect."

"I thought I told you that my reflections were done with?"

"The duke is a stranger, he is on a mission which renders him inviolable — Vincennes is very near the Bastille."

"The consequences concern me alone."

"But the reason for this meeting? What motive do you wish me to give him?"

"He will not ask you for any, you may be sure, — the duke must be as tired of me as I am of him; he must hate me as much as I hate him. I implore you, therefore, to find the duke, and if it is necessary for me to beg him to accept my offer, I will do so."

"That is useless — the duke has informed me that he wishes

to speak to me. He is playing cards with the King. Let us both go there. I will draw him aside into the gallery. You will remain at a distance. Two words will suffice."

"Very good. I will take De Wardes to keep me in countenance."

"Why not Manicamp? De Wardes can always join us; let us leave him here."

"Yes, that is true."

"He knows nothing?"

"No, absolutely nothing. You are still cool to each other, then?"

"Has he told you nothing?"

"No."

"I do not like the man, and as I never liked him, it happens that we are no cooler to-day than yesterday."

"Let us start, then."

All four descended the stairs. De Guiche's carriage was waiting at the door and took them to the Palais-Royal.

On the way Raoul devised a plan of action. Sole depositary of two secrets, he did not despair of concluding some arrangement between the two parties. He knew he had influence over Buckingham, he realized his ascendancy over De Guiche, and for this reason things did not seem to him so hopeless. On reaching the gallery, which was aglow and in which the most beautiful and the most illustrious women of the court moved about like stars in their own atmosphere of light, Raoul could not help forgetting De Guiche for a moment to gaze at Louise, who, in the midst of her companions, like a fascinated dove, was looking intently at the royal circle ablaze with gold and diamonds. The men were standing, the King alone was seated. Raoul perceived Buckingham. The latter was ten feet from Monsieur, in the midst of a group of French and English who were admiring his aristocratic bearing and the incomparable magnificence of his clothes. Some of the old courtiers remembered having seen his father, but their recollections were in no way detrimental to the son. Buckingham was talking with Fouquet, who was speaking of Belle-Isle.

"I cannot approach him just now," said Raoul.

"Wait and choose your time, but finish everything at once. I am all on fire."

"See, here is our deliverer," said Raoul, perceiving D'Ar

tagnan, who, magnificent in his new uniform of captain of the musketeers, had just entered the gallery in grand style. And he started towards D'Artagnan.

"The Comte de la Fère has been looking for you, chevalier," said Raoul.

"Yes," replied D'Artagnan, "I have just left him."

"I understood that you were to pass a part of the night together."

"Arrangements have been made for us to meet again."

As he answered Raoul, D'Artagnan was looking absently to right and left as if seeking some one in the crowd or something in the room. Suddenly his eye became fixed like that of an eagle on perceiving its prey. Raoul followed the direction of this glance and saw that De Guiche and D'Artagnan were bowing to each other, but he could not distinguish to whom the captain's questioning and haughty glance was given.

"M. le Chevalier," said Raoul, "you are the only man who can help me."

"In what way, my dear vicomte?"

"By interrupting M. de Buckingham, to whom I have a few words to say; and since he is talking with M. Fouquet you understand that I cannot throw myself into the midst of the conversation."

"Ah, so M. Fouquet is there, is he?" asked D'Artagnan.

"Do you not see him? Look!"

"Faith, yes!" But do you think that I have a better right than you?"

"You are more important."

"Ah, that is true; I am captain of the musketeers. I was promised this rank for so long and have held it for so short a time that I always forget my dignity."

"You will render me this service, will you not?"

"M. Fouquet — the devil!"

"Have you anything against him?"

"No, on the contrary it is rather he who might have something against me. However, as it will be necessary some day or other —"

"Wait! I think he is looking at you; or might it be —"

"No, no, you are not mistaken, it is indeed to me that he is doing this honor."

"The time is ripe, then."

"You think so?"

"Go, I beseech you."

"I will."

De Guiche did not lose sight of Raoul, who motioned to him that everything had been arranged.

D'Artagnan went straight to the group and bowed courteously to M. Fouquet as well as to the others.

"How do you do, M. d'Artagnan? We were speaking of Belle-Isle-en-Mer," said Fouquet, with that knowledge of the world and that calm look which takes half a lifetime to acquire, and which some men, in spite of all their study, never gain.

"Belle-Isle-en-Mer? Ah," said D'Artagnan, "that belongs to you, I believe, M. Fouquet."

"Monsieur has just told me that he gave it to the King," said Buckingham. "Your servant, M. d'Artagnan."

"Do you know Belle-Isle, chevalier?" asked Fouquet of the musketeer.

"I have been there only once, monsieur," replied D'Artagnan, promptly and courteously.

"Did you remain there long?"

"Scarcely a day, my lord."

"Did you see it?"

"All that could be seen in a day."

"That is a great deal when one has your eyes, monsieur."

D'Artagnan bowed.

Meantime Raoul had made a sign to Buckingham.

"M. le Surintendant," said Buckingham, "I shall leave to you the captain, who is more conversant than I with bastions, scarps, and counter-scarps, to join a friend who is beckoning to me. You understand —"

Whereupon Buckingham left the group and advanced towards Raoul, stopping an instant at the table where Madame, the queen mother, the young Queen, and the King were playing.

"Come, Raoul," said De Guiche, "there he is! Hurry up!"

Having paid a compliment to Madame, Buckingham continued his way towards Raoul, who advanced to meet him.

De Guiche remained in his place, following the duke with his eyes. The manœuvre was planned in such a way that the meeting of the two young men took place in the space left vacant between the group of card players and the gallery, where some of the more sober minded gentlemen were promenading, and pausing now and then to converse.

But at the moment when the two lines were about to unite they were separated by a third. It was Monsieur advancing towards the Duke of Buckingham. Monsieur wore on his painted and perfumed lips his most charming smile.

"Great heavens!" said he, with affectionate courtesy, "what have I just heard, my dear duke?"

Buckingham turned. He had not seen Monsieur approach; he had heard his voice, that was all. In spite of himself he shuddered. A slight pallor overspread his cheeks.

"Monseigneur," said he, "what has been told your Highness that seems to cause you such great surprise?"

"Something which makes me perfectly hopeless, monsieur," said the prince, "something which will be a grief to the whole court."

"Ah! your Highness is too good," said Buckingham, "for I see that you allude to my departure."

"Exactly."

"Alas, Monseigneur, in Paris five or six days hence my departure will be a cause of grief only to me."

De Guiche overheard the words from where he was standing, and shuddered in his turn.

"His departure," he murmured; "what is he saying?"

Philippe continued with the same gracious manner:

"I can easily understand that the King of Great Britain is recalling you, monsieur. It is well known that his Majesty Charles II., who prides himself on his knowledge of courtiers, cannot do without you. But that we would lose you without regret, that I cannot understand. Accept the assurance of mine, therefore."

"Monseigneur," said the duke, "believe me, if I leave the court of France —"

"It is because you are recalled; I understand that, but if you think that my wish would have weight with the King, I will volunteer to beg his Majesty Charles II. to leave you with us a little while longer."

"So much kindness overwhelms me, my lord," replied Buckingham; "but I have received positive orders. My stay in France was limited; I have prolonged it at the risk of offending my gracious sovereign. It was only to-day I remembered that I should have gone four days ago."

"Oh!" exclaimed Monsieur.

"Yes;" added Buckingham, raising his voice in such a

manner as to be overheard by the princesses, "however, I resemble the man from the east who was mad for several days from a beautiful dream he had had, but who one fine morning awoke entirely cured, and quite rational. The court of France has environments similar to this dream, my lord; but at length one awakes and leaves. Therefore I cannot prolong my visit, as your Highness has kindly asked me to do."

"When do you leave," inquired Philippe, with a manner full of interest.

"To-morrow, my lord, — my carriages have been ready for three days."

The Duc d'Orléans nodded his head as if to signify:

"Since your decision is made, duke, there is nothing to be said."

Buckingham raised his eyes to the queen's; his glance met that of Anne of Austria, who thanked him and showed her approval of what he had said by a gesture. This gesture was returned by the duke, who hid under a smile the contraction of his heart. Monsieur moved away in the direction by which he had come. At the same moment, however, De Guiche approached from the opposite direction. Raoul feared that the impatient young man had come to make the proposition himself, and hastened on before him.

"No, no, Raoul, all is useless now," said De Guiche, extending both hands to the duke and drawing him behind a column.

"Oh!" he continued, "forgive me for what I wrote to you; I was mad! Give me back my letter."

"It is true," replied the young duke, with a melancholy smile.

"You cannot be angry with me any longer."

"Oh! duke, duke, forgive me! My friendship, my everlasting friendship —"

"Why, indeed, should you be angry with me, count, from the moment I leave her, never to see her again?"

Raoul heard these words and, realizing that his presence was now useless between the two young men, who no longer had any but friendly words to exchange, stepped back a few paces. This movement brought him near De Wardes, who was talking of the departure of Buckingham. The one to whom he was speaking was the Chevalier de Lorraine.

"A wise retreat!" said De Wardes.

"Why so?"

"Because it saves the dear duke a sword-thrust."

At this they both laughed.

Raoul, indignant, turned round with a frown; the blood mounted to his temples, his lips curled.

The Chevalier de Lorraine turned on his heel; De Wardes stood still and waited.

"Monsieur," said Raoul to De Wardes, "will you not break yourself of the habit of insulting the absent? Yesterday it was M. d'Artagnan; to-day it is M. de Buckingham."

"Monsieur," said De Wardes, "you well know that occasionally I insult, too, those who are present."

De Wardes was near Raoul, their shoulders touched, their faces were bent towards each other, as if to catch fire from the heat of their breath and of their anger.

It was evident that one was at the height of his fury, the other at the end of his patience. Suddenly they heard a voice behind them full of grace and courtesy saying: "I heard some one call me, I think."

They turned; it was D'Artagnan who, with smiling eye and laughing face, had just laid his hand on De Wardes' shoulder.

Raoul stepped aside to make room for the musketeer. De Wardes trembled from head to foot, grew pale, but did not move.

D'Artagnan, still with the same smile, took the place which Raoul had left for him.

"Thanks, my dear Raoul," said he; "M. de Wardes, I want to talk with you. Do not go away, Raoul; every one may hear what I have to say to M. de Wardes."

Then his smile faded, and his glance became as cold and as sharp as a steel blade.

"I am at your orders, monsieur," said De Wardes.

"Monsieur," resumed D'Artagnan, "for a long time I have sought an opportunity of speaking with you; to-day only have I found it. As to the place, it is poorly chosen, I admit; but if you will trouble yourself to come as far as my apartments, which are on the staircase at the end of the gallery —"

"I will follow you, monsieur," said De Wardes.

"Are you alone here, monsieur?" asked D'Artagnan.

"No: I have M. Manicamp and M. de Guiche, two of my friends."

"Very good," said D'Artagnan; "but two persons are too few; you can find others, can you not?"

"Certainly!" said the young man, who did not know at what D'Artagnan was aiming. "As many as you wish."

"Friends?"

"Yes, monsieur."

"Good friends?"

"No doubt of that."

"Well, supply a goodly number, I beg. And, Raoul, you come too, and bring M. de Guiche and the Duke of Buckingham, if you please."

"Odds! monsieur! What a furore!" replied De Wardes, trying to smile.

The captain made him a sign with his hands recommending him to patience.

"I am never excitable. Therefore I wait for you, monsieur," said he.

"Do so."

"Au revoir, then!"

And he turned towards his apartment.

D'Artagnan's room was not vacant; the Comte de la Fère was waiting there, seated in the recess of a window.

"Well," said he, seeing D'Artagnan enter.

"Well," said the latter, "M. de Wardes in company with some of his friends as well as of ours has done me the honor of paying me a little visit." In fact, behind the musketeer appeared De Wardes and Manicamp.

De Guiche and Buckingham followed in some surprise, not knowing what was expected of them.

Raoul came in with two or three gentlemen. As he entered his glance wandered around the room, and perceiving the count he went and placed himself by him.

D'Artagnan received his visitors with all the courtesy of which he was capable, at the same time preserving his calm, unmoved demeanor.

All present were men of distinction, occupying posts of honor at court. After he had apologized to each one for the trouble he had caused, he turned towards De Wardes, who, in spite of his self-command, could not prevent his face from showing some surprise mingled with uneasiness.

"Monsieur," said he, "now that we are here, outside of the King's palace, and can speak without failing in the matters of propriety, I am going to inform you why I have taken the liberty of asking you to come to my apartment and to meet

with these gentlemen. I have learned through my friend, the Comte de la Fère, of the injurious reports you have been circulating concerning me. You have stated that you consider me your mortal enemy, because you say I was your father's."

"That is true, monsieur; I did say so," replied De Wardes, whose pallid face became slightly flushed.

"So you accuse me of a crime, of a fault, or of some cowardly act. I beg you to specify your charges."

"Before witnesses, monsieur?"

"Yes, certainly, before witnesses, and you see that I have chosen those who are experts in matters of honor."

"You do not appreciate my delicacy, monsieur. I have accused you, it is true; but I have kept the secret of the accusation. I entered into no details; but contented myself by expressing my hatred before those for whom it was almost a duty to inform you of it. You have taken no account of my discretion, although you were interested in my silence. I do not recognize in that your customary prudence, M. d'Artagnan."

D'Artagnan bit the corner of his mustache.

"Monsieur," said he, "I have already had the honor of asking you to state the grievances you have against me."

"Aloud?"

"Of course."

"In that case I shall speak."

"Speak, monsieur," said D'Artagnan, bowing, "we are all listening to you."

"Well, monsieur, it is a question not of a wrong against me, but of one against my father."

"You have already said that."

"Yes, but there are certain subjects one approaches with hesitation."

"If this hesitation really exists, I beg you to overcome it."

"Even in case there is a question of a disgraceful action?"

"In any case."

The witnesses of this scene began by looking at one another in some uneasiness. They were reassured, however, on seeing that D'Artagnan's face betrayed no emotion. De Wardes maintained silence.

"Speak, monsieur," said the musketeer. "You must see you are keeping us waiting."

"Well, listen. My father loved a noble lady, and this lady loved my father."

D'Artagnan and Athos exchanged looks.

De Wardes continued :

"M. d'Artagnan found some letters which indicated a meeting, substituted himself under disguise for the one who was expected, and took advantage of the darkness."

"That is true," said D'Artagnan. A slight murmur was heard among those present.

"Yes, I committed that dishonorable act. You should have added, monsieur, since you are so impartial, that at the time at which the event with which you reproach me happened I was not yet twenty-one years old."

"The act is none the less shameful," said De Wardes, "and a gentleman who has attained the age of reason should not commit any act of indelicacy." A second murmur was heard, this time of astonishment, and almost of doubt.

"It was indeed a shameful deception," said D'Artagnan, "and I have not waited for M. de Wardes to reproach me for it in order to reproach myself for it, and very bitterly too. Age has made me more reasonable, and, above all, more honest, and I have atoned for this wrong by lasting regrets. But I appeal to you, gentlemen; this occurred in 1626, and, fortunately for you, it was a time which you know only by tradition, a time when love was not over-scrupulous, when consciences did not distil, as to-day, poison and bitterness. We were young soldiers, always fighting, always being attacked. Our swords always unsheathed or at least half-drawn; always facing death. War made us hard, and the cardinal pressed us. Indeed I have repented, and furthermore, I still repent, M. de Wardes."

"Yes, monsieur, I understand that, for the act needed repentance; but nevertheless you were the cause of the lady's disgrace. The one of whom you are speaking, covered with shame, and bowed down beneath the insult, left France and no one ever knew what became of her —"

"Oh!" said the Comte de la Fère extending his arm towards De Wardes with a sinister smile. "Oh, yes, monsieur, she was seen: and there are even some here who having heard her spoken of could recognize her from the portrait I am about to give of her. She was a woman of twenty-five, slender, pale, and fair-haired, and she was married in England."

"Married?" exclaimed De Wardes.

"Ah! You did not know that she was married? You see that we are better informed than you, M. de Wardes. Do you know that she was usually called 'Milady,' without further qualification?"

"Yes, monsieur, I know that."

"Great heavens!" murmured Buckingham.

"Well, that woman, who came from England, returned to England, after having thrice conspired against the life of M. d'Artagnan. That was justice, was it not? I wished it, since M. d'Artagnan had insulted her. But that which was no longer just was the fact that in England, by her seductions this woman enslaved a young man who was in the service of Lord Winter, and who was named Felton. You grow pale, my lord Buckingham, your eyes glow with anger and grief. Finish the story, then, my lord, and tell M. de Wardes who this woman was who placed the knife in the hand of your father's murderer." A cry escaped from the lips of all. The young duke passed his handkerchief across his forehead, damp with perspiration.

There was dead silence among those present.

"You see, M. de Wardes," said D'Artagnan, whom this story had impressed the more as his own recollection revived at the words of Athos, "you see that my crime was not the cause of the loss of a soul, but that the soul was pretty well lost before my regret. It is therefore an act of conscience. But now that this is settled, there remains for me, M. de Wardes, humbly to beg pardon for this shameful act, as I would most surely have begged pardon from your father, were he still alive, and had I met him after my return to France following the death of Charles I."

"But this is too much, M. d'Artagnan," quickly exclaimed several voices.

"No, gentlemen," said the captain. "Now, M. de Wardes, I hope that all is finished between us, and that you will not happen again to speak ill of me. The affair is fully settled, is it not?"

De Wardes bowed, muttering to himself.

"I trust also," continued D'Artagnan, approaching the young man, "that you will speak no further ill of any one, as you have the unfortunate habit of doing; for a man as conscientious and as faultless as you, who reproach an old soldier

for a youthful prank, after thirty-five years, — you, I say, who advocate this purity of conscience, you on your side will undertake the tacit agreement to do nothing against conscience or honor. Now listen carefully to what remains for me to say to you, M. de Wardes; take care that no story in which your name figures reaches my ears."

"Monsieur," said De Wardes, "it is useless to threaten for nothing."

"Oh! I have not finished, M. de Wardes," resumed D'Artagnan; "you are condemned to hear me further —"

The circle drew closer; its members were filled with interest.

"You spoke just now of the honor of a woman, and of the honor of your father; you pleased us by speaking as you did, for it is good to think that the feeling of delicacy and probity which apparently did not exist in our souls lives in those of our children, and it is beautiful, too, to see a young man, at an age when from habit one is a thief so far as the honor of women is concerned, — it is delightful to see this young man respect and defend it."

De Wardes compressed his lips and clinched his hands, evidently very anxious to know how this discourse, the commencement of which had been so disturbing, would end.

"How does it happen, then," continued D'Artagnan, "that you permitted yourself to say to the Vicomte de Bragelonne that he was ignorant of who his mother was?"

Raoul's eyes flashed.

"Oh!" cried he, springing forward, "M. le Chevalier, that is an entirely personal affair with me."

De Wardes smiled maliciously.

D'Artagnan pushed Raoul aside with his arm.

"Do not interrupt me, young man!" said he, flashing an imperative glance at De Wardes.

"I am now discussing a question which cannot be settled by the sword," he continued. "I am discussing it before men of honor, all of whom have more than once held swords in their hands. I have chosen them purposely. Now these gentlemen know that every secret for which one fights ceases to be a secret. I repeat, therefore, my question to M. de Wardes: For what reason did you offend this young man, in offending both his father and his mother?"

"It seems to me," said De Wardes, "that the words are free,

when one offers to support them by every means at the disposal of a brave man."

"Ah! monsieur, what are the means, tell me, by the aid of which a brave man may sustain a slanderous word?"

"The sword."

"You fail, not only in logic, by saying that, but still more in religion and honor. You expose the lives of several men, without mentioning your own, which seems to me to be one of adventure. But fashions pass away, monsieur, and the fashion of duels has passed, without referring to the edicts of his Majesty, which forbid them. Therefore, in order to be consistent with your ideas of chivalry, you will offer your apologies to M. Raoul de Bragelonne; you will say to him that you regret having spoken so lightly; that the nobility and purity of his race are inscribed not only in his heart, but in every act of his life as well. You will do this, M. de Wardes, as I have done it just now; I, an old captain, to your child's mustache."

"And if I will not do it?" demanded De Wardes.

"Well, the result will be —"

"That which you hope to prevent," said De Wardes, laughing; "the result will be that your conciliatory policy will end in a violation of the King's prohibition."

"No, monsieur," said the captain, calmly, "you are wrong."

"What will happen, then?"

"This; I shall go to the King, with whom I am on pretty good terms, to whom I have had the happiness of rendering some services which date from a time before you were born, and who, in fact, at my request has just sent me an order in blank for M. Baisemeaux de Montlezun, governor of the Bastille; and I shall say to the King: 'Sire, a man in a cowardly way has insulted M. de Bragelonne by insulting his mother. I have written the name of this man on the warrant which your Majesty kindly gave me,' so that M. de Wardes is in the Bastille for three years."

And D'Artagnan, drawing from his pocket the order signed by the King, held it out to De Wardes. Then seeing that the young man was not wholly convinced and that he was taking the warning for an idle threat, he shrugged his shoulders, and walked indifferently to the table on which lay a writing-case and a pen, the length of which would have frightened the topographical Porthos.

De Wardes saw that the threat could not possibly be more

serious; the Bastille at that time was already a thing to be feared. He took one step towards Raoul, and in an almost unintelligible voice said, "Monsieur, I offer you my apologies which were dictated to me just now by M. d'Artagnan, and which I am forced to make to you."

"One moment, one moment, monsieur," said the musketeer, with the greatest calmness; "you have mistaken the terms. I did not say, 'and which I am forced to make.' I said, 'which my conscience urges me to make.' This form is better than the other, believe me; and it will be worth much more, as it will be a truer expression of your sentiments."

"I subscribe to it, then," said De Wardes; "but in truth, gentlemen, confess that a sword-thrust through the body, as was formerly the custom, is much better than such tyranny."

"No, monsieur," replied Buckingham, "for the sword-thrust does not signify if you receive it that you are wrong or right, it merely shows that you are more or less skilful."

"Monsieur!" exclaimed De Wardes.

"Ah! you are going to say something unpleasant," said D'Artagnan, interrupting De Wardes. "And I am rendering you a service by stopping you right here."

"Is that all, monsieur?" asked De Wardes.

"Absolutely everything," replied D'Artagnan, "and these gentlemen and I are satisfied with you."

"Believe me, monsieur," replied De Wardes, "your reconciliations are not successful."

"How so?"

"Because we are going to part, M. de Bragelonne and I, more at enmity than ever, I will wager."

"As for me, you are mistaken, monsieur," replied Raoul; "I have not an atom of hard feeling against you in my heart."

This last blow overwhelmed De Wardes. He glanced about him like a man bewildered. D'Artagnan courteously saluted the gentlemen who had been kind enough to be present at the explanation and each one shook hands with him and withdrew. Not a hand was extended to De Wardes.

"Oh!" cried the young man, giving way to the anger which was consuming his heart. "Oh! I can find no one on whom to avenge myself!"

"Yes, you can, monsieur, for I am here," whispered a voice full of menace in his ear.

De Wardes turned and saw the Duke of Buckingham, who

no doubt having stayed behind with this intention had just approached him.

"You, monsieur?" cried De Wardes.

"Yes, I. I am no subject of the King of France, monsieur. I am not going to remain on the territory, since I am leaving for England. I, too, have amassed such despair and rage that, like you, I need to avenge myself on some one. I strongly approve of the principles of M. d'Artagnan, but I am not bound to apply them to you. I am an Englishman and I in turn come to propose to you what you have in vain proposed to others."

"Monsieur!"

"Come, dear M. de Wardes, since you are so terribly incensed, take me as a remedy. I shall be at Calais in thirty-four hours. Come with me, the journey will seem shorter if we go together than alone. We will draw the sword there on the sands covered by the tide, and which for six hours of the day are French territory, but for six other hours God's territory."

"Very good," replied De Wardes, "I accept."

"By Heaven," said the duke, "if you kill me, my dear M. de Wardes, you will, I promise you, be rendering me a signal service."

"I will do what I can to be agreeable to you, duke," said De Wardes.

"It is settled, then; I am to carry you away."

"I shall be at your orders. Forsooth! I had need of some real danger, some mortal peril to calm me."

"Well, I think that you have found your man. Your servant, M. de Wardes; to-morrow, until to-morrow; my valet will tell you the exact hour of leaving; we will go together like two good friends. I usually travel like a man in a hurry. Good-bye."

Buckingham saluted De Wardes and returned to the apartments of the King.

De Wardes, exasperated, left the Palais-Royal and went rapidly through the street to the house in which he lived.

CHAPTER II.

BAISEMEAUX DE MONTLEZUN.

AFTER the somewhat severe lesson given to De Wardes, Athos and D'Artagnan together descended the s'aircase which led to the court of the Palais-Royal.

"You see," said Athos to D'Artagnan, "in the end Raoul cannot escape this duel with De Wardes; De Wardes is as brave as he is wicked."

"I know such fellows," replied D'Artagnan; "I had an affair with the father. I assure you that at that time I had good muscles and brute strength; I assure you, I say, that the father gave me trouble. Yet you should have seen how I settled him. Ah, my friend, such affairs do not occur in these days. I had a hand which did not remain quiet for an instant, a hand like quicksilver, as you know, Athos, for you have seen me at work. It was no longer a simple bit of steel: it was a serpent which assumed every form and length, in order to place its head — that is, its bite — in a suitable position; I gave myself six feet, then three. I pressed my antagonist closely, then I sprang back ten feet. There was no human power that could resist that ferocious energy. Well, De Wardes, the father, with the bravery of his race, that dogged bravery, took a good deal of my time, and I remember that at the end of the combat my fingers were tired out."

"Therefore, as I told you," resumed Athos, "the son will always be looking for Raoul and will end by meeting him, for Raoul is easily found when sought for."

"Agreed, my friend, but Raoul calculates well; he is not angry with De Wardes; he has said so; he will wait until provoked; then his position will be good. The King cannot get angry; besides, we shall know how to pacify the King. But why these fears of yours and this anxiety? You do not easily become alarmed."

"Well, this is what troubles me. To-morrow Raoul is to see the King, who will tell him his desires regarding a certain marriage. Raoul will grow angry like the lover he is, and once in a bad temper, if he meets De Wardes, the shell will explode."

"We will prevent the explosion, dear friend."

"Not I, for I wish to return to Blois. All this painted ele-

gance of the court, all these intrigues, disgust me. I am no longer a young man to make a compact with the meannesses of to-day. I have read in God's book many things too beautiful and too comprehensive to occupy myself with any interest with the trifling phrases which these men whisper among themselves when they wish to deceive one another. In a word, I am bored in Paris, wherever I do not have you; and as I cannot always leave you, I wish to return to Blois."

"Oh! how wrong you are, Athos! How you belie your origin and the destiny of your soul! Men of your stamp are made to go until the very last day in the full possession of their faculties. See my old sword of La Rochelle, that Spanish blade which served me well for thirty years; one winter's day, in falling on the marble floor of the Louvre, it broke in two. My dear fellow, I had a hunting-knife made of it, which will last a hundred years longer. You, Athos, with your loyalty, your frankness, your cool courage, and your sound education, are the man necessary to warn and direct kings. Stay here. M. Fouquet will not last as long as my Spanish blade."

"Come," said Athos, smiling, "here is D'Artagnan, who, after having raised me to the clouds and made of me a sort of god, hurls me from the top of Olympus and flattens me out on the earth. I have higher ambitions, my friend. To be a minister, to be a slave, — never! Am I not greater? I am nothing. I remember occasionally hearing you call me 'the great Athos.' I would defy you, if I were minister, to confirm this epithet. No, no, I do not thus surrender."

"In that case we will speak no more of it; give up everything, even the brotherly feeling between us!"

"Oh, my dear friend, what you say is rather severe!"

D'Artagnan shook Athos' hand heartily.

"No, no, renounce without fear. Raoul can get on without you; I am in Paris."

"Well, then, I shall return to Blois. This evening you will say adieu to me. To-morrow at break of day I shall mount my horse."

"You cannot return alone to your hotel; why did you not bring Grimaud with you?"

"My friend, Grimaud is sleeping; he goes to bed early. My poor old servant grows tired easily. He came from Blois with me, and I compelled him to stay in his room; but if he had to retrace the forty leagues which separate us from Blois, without

drawing breath, he would die without a complaint. So I hold to my Grimaud."

"I will give you a musketeer to carry your torch. Hello, there! Some one!" D'Artagnan leaned over the gilded railing. The heads of seven or eight musketeers appeared.

"Some one kindly disposed to escort the Comte de la Fère!" cried D'Artagnan.

"Thanks for your promptness, gentlemen," said Athos, "I could not inconvenience gentlemen in this way."

"I would willingly escort monsieur," said one, "if I did not have to speak to M. d'Artagnan."

"Who is that?" asked D'Artagnan, peering into the shadow.

"I, dear M. d'Artagnan."

"God forgive me, if it is not M. Baisemeaux."

"The same, monsieur."

"Well, my dear Baisemeaux, what are you doing there in the court-yard?"

"Awaiting your orders, my dear M. d'Artagnan."

"Ah! wretch that I am," thought D'Artagnan; "it is true; you have been informed that there was to be an arrest, and have come yourself instead of sending an officer!"

"I came because I had to speak with you."

"And you did not notify me?"

"I was waiting," said M. Baisemeaux, timidly.

"I shall leave you. Adieu, D'Artagnan," said Athos to his friend.

"Not until I present to you M. Baisemeaux de Montlezun, the governor of the Bastille."

Baisemeaux bowed; Athos did likewise.

"But you must know each other," added D'Artagnan.

"I have a vague recollection of monsieur," said Athos.

"My dear friend, you well know Baisemeaux, the King's guardsman, with whom we used formerly to have such good times in the cardinal's day."

"Perfectly," said Athos, taking his leave with affability.

"M. le Comte de la Fère, whose *nom de guerre* was Athos," said D'Artagnan in a whisper to Baisemeaux.

"Yes, yes, a brave man, one of the celebrated four," said Baisemeaux.

"Precisely. But come, my dear Baisemeaux, shall we talk?"

"If you please."

"In the first place as to the orders, that is done away with; there are none. The King has given up the idea of arresting the person in question."

"Ah, so much the worse!" sighed Baisemeaux.

"Why 'so much the worse'?" said D'Artagnan, laughing.

"Why, indeed!" exclaimed the governor of the Bastille, "my prisoners are my income!"

"Ah! that is true. I did not see the thing in that light."

"So there are no orders?"

Baisemeaux sighed again.

"You are the one," said he, "who has a good position: captain-lieutenant of the musketeers."

"It is good enough, yes. But I do not see what reason there is for you to envy me, you, governor of the Bastille, the first castle of France."

"I know that very well," said Baisemeaux, sadly.

"You say that like a penitent! I will exchange my profits for yours, if you wish!"

"Do not speak of profits," said Baisemeaux, "unless you wish to break my heart."

"But you look right and left as if you feared being arrested. You who look after those who are arrested."

"I notice that we are seen and heard and that it would be safer to talk in private, if you will grant me this favor."

"Baisemeaux! Baisemeaux! You evidently forget that we have been acquainted for thirty-five years. Do not assume such airs of sanctity. Be quite easy. I do not eat governors of the Bastille raw."

"Thank Heaven!"

"Come into the court-yard; we will promenade arm in arm. The moonlight is superb, and under the oak-trees you shall tell me your sad tale. Come."

He drew the doleful governor into the court, took him by the arm, as he had said, and in his rough, kindly way went on:

"Come, out with it; rattle away, Baisemeaux; what have you to tell me?"

"It is a long tale."

"Would you prefer to lament? My opinion is that that will be still longer. Here's a wager that you are making fifty thousand livres out of your pigeons in the Bastille."

"Would that I were, dear M. d'Artagnan!"

"You surprise me, Baisemeaux; look at yourself, now, my

dear fellow; *mordious!* you are actually playing the penitent! I must take you to a mirror: you would see in it that you are plump, florid, fat, and round as a cheese; that your eyes are like lighted coals, and that were it not for that ugly wrinkle you affect on your forehead you would not look fifty. But you are sixty, hey?"

"All that is true."

"Zounds, I know very well that it is true, as true as the fifty thousand livres' profit."

Little Baisemeaux stamped his foot.

"There! there!" said D'Artagnan, "I will make out your account for you: you were captain of the guardsmen of M. de Mazarin — twelve thousand livres a year; you have had them for twelve years — say, a total of one hundred forty thousand livres."

"Twelve thousand livres! Are you mad?" cried Baisemeaux; "the old miser never gave me but six thousand, and the expenses of the position amounted to six thousand five hundred. M. Colbert, who made me deduct the other six thousand livres, condescended to have me take fifty pistoles as a fee, so that, without that little estate at Montlezun, which brings in twelve thousand livres, I could not have met my obligations."

"Let us admit our mistake and pass on to the fifty thousand livres from the Bastille. There, I trust, you are fed and lodged. You have six thousand livres' salary."

"Well?"

"Good year or bad, fifty prisoners who, on an average, bring you in a thousand livres each."

"I don't deny it."

"That is fifty thousand livres a year; you have held the position three years; therefore you have one hundred and fifty thousand livres."

"You forget one detail, dear M. d'Artagnan."

"What is that?"

"That you received the appointment of captain from the hands of the King."

"I know that."

"While I received that of governor from MM. Tremblay and Louvière."

"That is so, and Tremblay was not a man to give you his appointment for nothing."

"Oh, nor Louvière either! The result is that I gave seventy-five thousand livres to Tremblay for his share."

"Fine! And to Louvière?"

"The same amount."

"At once?"

"No, that was impossible. The King did not wish, or rather M. de Mazarin did not wish, to seem to remove those two fellows who sprang from the barricades; he therefore permitted them to retire under certain conditions."

"What conditions?"

"Tremble! Three years' income, for the deal."

"The devil! so that the one hundred and fifty thousand livres have passed into their hands!"

"Exactly."

"And beyond that?"

"A sum of fifteen thousand crowns or fifty thousand pistoles, as you please, in three payments."

"Exorbitant!"

"That is not all."

"Come, now!"

"In default of my fulfilling one of the conditions, these gentlemen return to their positions. The King has been persuaded to sign that."

"Monstrous! Incredible!"

"It is nevertheless true."

"I pity you, my poor Baisemeaux. But, my dear friend, why the devil did M. Mazarin grant you this pretended favor? It would have been simpler to refuse it to you?"

"Oh! yes! but he was forced by my protector."

"Your protector? Who is that?"

"Odds! one of your friends, M. d'Herblay."

"M. d'Herblay! Aramis!"

"Exactly; he has been most kind to me."

"Kind! To make you enter that snare?"

"Listen! I wished to leave the cardinal's service. M. d'Herblay spoke to Louvière and to Tremblay for me; they objected. I wanted the appointment, for I know what it can give; in my distress I opened my heart to M. d'Herblay; he offered to answer for me for every payment."

"Bah! Aramis? Oh! you astound me. Aramis answered for you?"

"Like an honorable man. He obtained the signature; Tremblay and Louvière resigned. I have paid twenty-five thousand livres every year to each of those two gentlemen."

Every year, too, in May, M. d'Herblay himself comes to the Bastille to bring me two thousand five hundred pistoles to distribute among my crocodiles."

"Then you owe one hundred and fifty thousand livres to Aramis?"

"Ah! that is the cause of my despair; I owe him only a hundred thousand."

"I do not exactly understand you."

"Well, he came for two years. But it is now the thirty-first of May, and he has not come, and to-morrow noon the payment is due. And to-morrow if I do not pay, those gentlemen, by the terms of the contract, can break the contract. I shall be robbed, and shall have worked three years and given two hundred fifty thousand livres for nothing, my dear M. d'Artagnan, absolutely for nothing."

"This is strange," murmured D'Artagnan.

"You now see that I may well have wrinkles on my forehead."

"Oh, yes."

"You may imagine that although I am as round as a cheese and as fresh as an apple, although my eyes are as bright as lighted coals, I have reached the point of fearing lest I have not even a cheese nor an apple to eat, and that I shall have nothing but eyes with which to weep."

"This is distressing."

"So I have come to you, M. d'Artagnan, for you alone can pull me out of my trouble."

"How so?"

"You know the Abbé d'Herblay?"

"I should think so."

"You know him to be peculiar."

"Oh, yes."

"You can give me the address of his presbytery, for I have been to Noisy-le-Sec, and he is no longer there."

"He is Bishop of Vannes."

"Vannes, in Brittany?"

"Yes."

The little man began to tear his hair.

"Alas!" said he, "how can I go to Vannes between now and to-morrow noon? I am a lost man. Vannes! Vannes!" cried Baisemeaux.

"Your despair grieves me. Listen; a bishop is not al-

ways a resident; Monseigneur d'Herblay may not be as far away as you fear."

"Oh! tell me his address."

"I do not know it, my friend."

"Then indeed am I lost! I will go and throw myself at the King's feet."

"Why, Baisemeaux, you surprise me: if the Bastille is able to produce fifty thousand livres, why have you not screwed a hundred thousand out of it?"

"Because I am an honest man, dear M. d'Artagnan, and because my prisoners are fed like potentates."

"*Pardieu!* you are far advanced; give yourself a good attack of indigestion with your fine living, and put yourself out of the way between now and to-morrow noon."

"Cruel man! to have the heart to laugh!"

"No, you distress me. Come, Baisemeaux, have you any sense of honor?"

"Oh! captain!"

"Well, give me your word that you will not open your lips to any one about what I am going to tell you."

"Never, never!"

"You wish to put your hand on Aramis?"

"At any price!"

"Well, go and find M. Fouquet."

"What connection—"

"Stupid that you are! Where is Vannes?"

"By our Lady!"

"Vannes is in the diocese of Belle-Isle, or Belle-Isle is in the diocese of Vannes. Belle-Isle belongs to M. Fouquet; M. Fouquet nominated M. d'Herblay to that bishopric."

"You open my eyes, and give me back life."

"So much the better. Go, therefore, and simply say to M. Fouquet that you wish to speak to M. d'Herblay."

"Certainly! certainly!" cried Baisemeaux, delighted.

"But," said D'Artagnan, stopping him by a severe look, "your word of honor!"

"Oh! my sacred word of honor!" replied the little man, starting off.

"Where are you going?"

"To M. Fouquet."

"No, M. Fouquet is playing cards with the King. All you can do will be to go to M. Fouquet's house early to-morrow."

"I shall go; thanks."

"Good luck to you!"

"Thanks!"

"This is a strange tale," murmured D'Artagnan, who on leaving Baisemeaux slowly ascended his staircase. "What devilish interest can Aramis have in obliging Baisemeaux in that way? Well! We shall know some day or other."

CHAPTER III.

THE KING'S CARD-PARTY.

FOUQUET, as D'Artagnan had said, was present at the King's card-party.

It seemed as if the departure of Buckingham had shed balm on the wounded hearts of the previous evening. Monsieur, radiant, was making a thousand affectionate signs to his mother.

The Comte de Guiche could not part from Buckingham, and while playing, talked with him as to the details of his journey.

Buckingham, thoughtful and gentle, like a man who has made up his mind, listened to the count and from time to time cast on Madame a look of regret and hopeless tenderness.

The princess, in the gayest of moods, divided her attention among the King, who was playing with her, Monsieur, who was rallying her quietly on her large winnings, and De Guiche, who was evincing extravagant delight. As for Buckingham, she occupied herself but little with him; for her, this fugitive, this exile, was a memory, and no longer a man. Light hearts are made thus; whole for a time, they break suddenly with all that can upset their little calculations of selfish comfort. Madame accepted the smiles, the attentions, and the sighs of Buckingham when he was present; but what was the use of sighing, smiling, and falling on one's knees at a distance? Whither does the wind of the channel which tosses mighty ships carry sighs? Does any one know? The duke could not hide this change from himself; his heart was mortally hurt by it. Sensitive by nature, proud and susceptible of deep attachment, he cursed the day when love had

entered his heart. The glances he cast on Madame grew colder by degrees at the icy breath of his thoughts. He could not yet condemn, but he was strong enough to impose silence on the tumultuous cries of his heart. So soon as Madame suspected this change, she redoubled her activity to regain the love which was escaping her; her mind, timid and indecisive at first approach, showed itself in brilliant flashes; at any cost she must be noticed above every one, above the King himself. And she was. The queens, in spite of their dignity, the King in spite of the respect demanded by etiquette, were eclipsed.

The queens, at the outset stiff and formal, became more human and laughed. Madame Henrietta, the queen mother, was dazzled by this brilliancy which cast distinction upon her family, thanks to the wit of the granddaughter of Henri IV. The King, jealous as a young man and as a monarch of the superiority of all who surrounded him, could not prevent himself from surrendering to this petulance, so distinctively French, yet so vitalized by English humor. Like a child he was fascinated by that radiant beauty which was augmented by her wit. Madame's eyes shot fire. Gay words escaped from her ruddy lips like persuasion from the lips of the old Greek Nestor. Around the queens and the King the whole court, subdued by her enchantment, perceived for the first time that it could laugh before the greatest monarch alive, like people worthy of being called the most polished and the wittiest in the world. From that evening Madame had a success capable of astounding any one not born in those lofty regions called thrones, and who, in spite of their height, are sheltered from such giddiness. From that moment Louis XIV. regarded Madame as an important personage. Buckingham looked on her as a coquette worthy of the most cruel tortures. De Guiche regarded her as a divinity. The courtiers thought her a star whose light might become the focus for all favor, all power. And yet some years before, Louis XIV. had not even deigned to give his hand to this "ugly girl" for a ballet.

Meanwhile Buckingham had adored this coquette on both knees; De Guiche had thought of this divinity as a woman; and the courtiers on the passage of this star had not dared to applaud for fear of displeasing the King, to whom the star had formerly been displeasing.

This was what was taking place that memorable evening

during the King's card-party. The young Queen, although Spanish and the niece of Anne of Austria, loved the King and could not hide it, knew not how to dissimulate.

Anne of Austria, like every woman a keen observer, and imperious like every queen, felt the power of Madame and at once yielded to it. This determined the young Queen to raise the siege and retire to her own apartment. The King scarcely paid any attention to her departure, in spite of the pretended symptoms of indisposition which accompanied it. Secure within the rules of etiquette which he was beginning to introduce at court as an element in every relation, Louis XIV. was unmoved. He offered his hand to Madame without looking at Monsieur his brother, and led the young princess to the door of her apartments. It was noticed that on the threshold his Majesty, free from all restraint or less strong than the situation, gave vent to an enormous sigh. The women, who notice everything, — Mademoiselle de Montalais, for instance, — did not fail to say to their companions: "The King sighed; Madame sighed."

This was true.

Madame had sighed, quietly to be sure, but with an accompaniment far more dangerous for the King's peace of mind. Madame had sighed and had closed her beautiful black eyes, then she had opened them and, filled as they were with indescribable sadness, she had raised them to the King, whose face at that moment had visibly grown red.

The consequence of this blush, of these sighs exchanged, and of all this royal emotion, was that Montalais had committed an indiscretion, and that this indiscretion had certainly affected her companion, for Mademoiselle de la Vallière, less clear-sighted no doubt, turned pale when the King blushed, and, her duty thus calling her to Madame, had entered trembling from head to foot behind the princess without thinking of taking the gloves, which court etiquette required of her. It is true that this girl from the province could allege as excuse the agitation into which his royal Majesty had thrown her. In fact, wholly occupied in closing the door, Mademoiselle de la Vallière had involuntarily fixed her eyes on the King, who was walking backwards.

Louis XIV. returned to his card-playing; he made an attempt to speak to several people, but one could see that he was pre-occupied. He mixed various scores, which fact was taken

advantage of by several lords who had retained these habits since the time of M. de Mazarin — who had a poor memory but a good mind for arithmetic. Thus Manicamp, with a thoughtless air which does not deceive the reader, — Manicamp, the most honest fellow in the world, quietly gathered up twenty thousand livres which lay on the table, and the ownership of which did not seem to belong legitimately to any one.

Likewise, M. de Wardes, whose head was somewhat upset by the events of the evening, left sixty double louis he had won from the Duke of Buckingham, and which the latter, incapable, like his father, of soiling his hands with any money, had abandoned to the chandelier as if that object were alive.

The King did not recover his usual ease of manner until M. Colbert, who had been watching for some time, approached and very respectfully, no doubt, but with insistence, whispered a word of advice into the still tingling ear of the monarch. At the suggestion Louis gave further attention, and at once looking around, said :

"Is M. Fouquet no longer here?"

"Yes, yes, Sire," replied the voice of the superintendent, who had been talking with Buckingham.

He approached. The King with a charmingly careless air advanced a step towards him :

"Pardon me, monsieur, if I interrupt your conversation," said Louis, "but I claim you whenever I need you."

"My services are always for the King," replied Fouquet.

"And especially your cash-box," said the King, laughing with a cunning demeanor.

"My cash-box even more than all else," said Fouquet, coldly.

"Here are the facts, monsieur. I wish to give a fête at Fontainebleau ; keep open house for fifteen days. I have need of —"

He glanced sidewise at Colbert. Fouquet waited without saying.

"Of?" said he.

"Of four millions," said the King, replying to Colbert's cruel smile.

"Four millions?" said Fouquet, bowing low.

And his nails, buried in his bosom, dug in it a bloody furrow : yet the serenity of his expression was not for one moment altered.

"Yes, monsieur," said the King.

"When, Sire?"

"Oh, take your time. That is — no — as soon as possible."

"Time is necessary."

"Time!" cried Colbert, triumphantly.

"Time to count the crowns," said the superintendent, with haughty scorn, "one can draw and weigh only a million a day, monsieur."

"Four days, then," said Colbert.

"Oh!" replied Fouquet, addressing the King; "my clerks perform wonders for your Majesty's service. The sum shall be ready in three days."

It was Colbert's turn to grow pale. Louis looked at him in surprise.

Fouquet withdrew without ostentation or weakness, smiling at his numerous friends, in whose eyes alone he read true friendship, an interest amounting to pity.

But Fouquet was not to be judged by the smile; in reality, death lay in his heart. Drops of blood stained the fine linen which covered his breast under his coat.

The coat hid the blood; the smile hid his rage. From the way in which he approached his carriage, his servants guessed that their master was not in good temper. The result of this knowledge was that the orders were executed with that precision which is found on a man-of-war commanded during a storm by an irritated captain. The carriage did not roll: it flew. Fouquet scarcely had time to collect himself during the drive. On arriving, he went to the apartments of Aramis. The latter had not yet retired.

As for Porthos, he had supped very comfortably off a leg of mutton, two roast pheasants, and a mountain of cray-fish; then he had had his body anointed with perfumed oils, in the manner of the ancient wrestlers; this performance over, he was wrapped in flannels and carried to a warm bed.

Aramis, as we have said, had not yet retired. Comfortable in a velvet dressing-gown, he was writing letter after letter in that fine and hurried handwriting, one page of which contained a quarter of a volume.

The door was hurriedly opened; the superintendent appeared, pale, agitated, anxious. Aramis raised his head.

"Good evening, my dear host," said he. And his observing glance detected all the sadness, all the agitation of the other.

"Good game with the King?" asked Aramis, in order to open the conversation.

Fouquet seated himself, and by a gesture dismissed the lackey who had followed him. When the servant had gone he said:

"Very good."

Aramis, who had followed him with his eyes, saw him stretch himself on the cushions in feverish impatience.

"You lost, as usual?" asked Aramis, pen in hand.

"More than usual," replied Fouquet.

"But it is known that you can bear losses bravely."

"Sometimes."

"Good! were you playing boldly, M. Fouquet?"

"There is playing and playing, M. d'Herblay."

"How much have you lost, my lord?" asked Aramis with some anxiety.

Fouquet collected himself a moment to pitch his voice in a conventional tone; then without a trace of emotion said:

"The evening has cost me four millions."

A bitter laugh drowned the last words. Aramis had not expected such a sum, and dropped his pen.

"Four millions!" said he; "you played for four millions? Impossible!"

"M. Colbert held my cards," replied the superintendent, with the same bitter laugh.

"Ah, I understand now, my lord. So, a new call for funds?"

"Yes, my friend."

"From the King?"

"From his own lips. It would be impossible to ruin a man with a more beautiful smile."

"The devil!"

"What do you think of it?"

"By heaven! I think that they want to ruin you. That is evident."

"So that is still your opinion?"

"Yes. Moreover, there is nothing in that to surprise you, since it is what we have foreseen."

"Yes; but I did not expect four millions."

"It is true that the amount is large, but, after all, four millions are not the death of a man, especially when that man is M. Fouquet."

"If you knew the contents of my money-box, my dear D'Herblay, you would be less calm."

"And you promised?"

"What would you expect me to do?"

"That is true."

"The day I refuse, Colbert will procure the amount; I know nothing about how or where, but he will find it and I shall be lost."

"Doubtless, and in how many days did you promise these four millions?"

"In three days. The King seemed in great haste."

"In three days!"

"Oh, my friend," went on Fouquet, "when we think that just now as I passed through the street some people cried out: 'There is the rich M. Fouquet!'—in truth, dear D'Herblay, it is enough to turn one's head!"

"Oh, no! my lord, stop right here! The matter is not worth the trouble," said Aramis calmly, sprinkling some sand over the letter he had just finished writing.

"Some remedy, then; some remedy for this incurable malady?"

"There is only one — pay."

"But I am not sure that I can get the sum. All must be used up. They have paid for Belle-Isle; they have paid for the pension; money, since the investigation of the accounts, is rare. Admitting that the payment is made this time, how can it be done again? For, believe me, we have not come to the end. When kings have once touched money they are like tigers which have tasted flesh: they devour. Some day I shall have to say: 'Impossible, Sire!' Well, that day I shall be lost!"

Aramis shrugged his shoulders slightly.

"A man in your position, my lord," said he, "is lost only when he wishes to be."

"In whatever position he may be, a man cannot struggle against a king."

"Bah! in my youth I struggled successfully with Cardinal Richelieu, who was King of France — more, cardinal!"

"Have I armies, troops, treasures? I no longer have even Belle-Isle."

"Bah! 'Necessity is the mother of invention.' When you think all is lost —"

"Well?"

"Something unexpected turns up which will save everything —"

"And who will discover this marvellous something?"

"You."

"I? I hand in my resignation as inventor."

"I, then."

"Be it so. But in that case set yourself to the task with all speed."

"Oh! we have time enough."

"You will kill me with your calmness, D'Herblay," said the superintendent, passing his handkerchief across his brow.

"Do you not remember what I told you once?"

"What did you tell me?"

"Not to worry, if you have courage. Have you any?"

"I think so."

"In that case do not be uneasy."

"It is decided, then, that at the last moment you will come to my aid?"

"That will only be paying you back what I owe you, my lord."

"It is the trade of financiers to anticipate the needs of men like you, D'Herblay."

"If being obliging is the trade of financiers, charity is the virtue of the clergy. Only this time too, my lord, act. You are not yet conquered; at the last moment we shall see."

"We shall see in a short time, then."

"Very well. Now permit me to tell you that, personally, I greatly regret that you are so short of money."

"Why so?"

"Because I was about to ask you for some."

"For yourself?"

"For myself or mine, for mine or ours."

"How much?"

"Oh! a round sum, it is true, but not very exorbitant."

"State the amount."

"Fifty thousand livres."

"A mere nothing!"

"Really?"

"One can always lay hands on fifty thousand livres. Why is not that rogue Colbert as satisfied as you are? I should trouble myself much less than I am doing at present. When do you want this sum?"

"To-morrow morning."

"Good, and —?"

"Ah, true, its destination, you mean?"

"No, chevalier, no; I do not need any explanation."

"At any rate, to-morrow is June first."

"Well?"

"One of our bonds is due."

"We have bonds, then?"

"Certainly. To-morrow we pay our last third."

"What third?"

"The hundred and fifty thousand livres to Baisemeaux."

"Baisemeaux? Who is he?"

"The governor of the Bastille."

"Ah, yes, true; you make me pay away one hundred and fifty thousand livres for this man!"

"Well!"

"But why?"

"Because of the appointment which he or rather we bought from Louvière and Tremblay."

"All that is very vague in my mind."

"I imagine so, you have so much on hand! However, I do not believe you have anything more important than this."

"Tell me, then, why we purchased this appointment."

"In order to be of use to him."

"Ah!"

"To him, in the first place."

"And then?"

"Then, to ourselves."

"How to ourselves? You are joking."

"My lord, there are times when a governor of the Bastille is a very delightful acquaintance."

"I have the fortune not to understand you, D'Herblay."

"My lord, we have our poets, our inventor, our architect, our musicians, our printer, our painters; we must have our governor of the Bastille."

"Ah! you think so?"

"My lord, let us not delude ourselves. We are very likely to pay a visit to the Bastille, dear M. Fouquet," added the prelate, showing between his pale lips teeth which were still the same beautiful teeth admired thirty years before by Marie Michon.

"And you think a hundred and fifty thousand livres is not too much for that, D'Herblay? I assure you that ordinarily you place your money better."

"The day will come when you will admit your mistake."

"My dear D'Herblay, the moment one enters the Bastille, one is no longer protected by the past."

"Yes, he is, if the bonds are perfectly regular; and then, believe me, that excellent Baisemeaux has not a courtier's heart. I am sure that he will be very grateful to me for this money, without counting, as I told you, my lord, the fact of my retaining the titles."

"What a devilish affair! Usury is a matter of kindness!"

"My lord, my lord, do not mix yourself up with all that; if there is usury, I alone practise it. We will both of us profit by it; that is all."

"Some intrigue, D'Herblay?"

"I do not deny it."

"And Baisemeaux an accomplice?"

"Why not? One has worse accomplices than he. So I may count to-morrow on the five thousand pistoles?"

"Do you want them this evening?"

"That would be still better, for I wish to start early; this poor Baisemeaux, who does not know what has become of me, is on pins."

"You shall have the money in an hour. Ah, D'Herblay, the interest of your hundred fifty thousand livres will never pay my four millions!" said Fouquet, rising.

"Why not, my lord?"

"Good evening. I have business with my clerks before retiring."

"I wish you a good night, my lord."

"D'Herblay, you wish me the impossible."

"I am to have my fifty thousand livres this evening?"

"Yes."

"Well, sleep soundly, I tell you. Good night, my lord."

In spite of this assurance and the tone in which it was given, Fouquet went out shaking his head and heaving a sigh.

CHAPTER IV.

THE SMALL ACCOUNTS OF M. BAISEMEAUX DE MONTLEZUN.

SEVEN o'clock was striking from Saint-Paul when Aramis, on horseback, in the clothes of a simple citizen, — that is, dressed in colored cloth having for all distinction a kind of hunting-knife at his side, — passed along the Rue du Petit Muse, and stopped opposite the Rue des Tournelles, at the gate of the Bastille. Two sentinels were on guard before the gate. They made no objection to admitting Aramis, who entered on horseback as he was, and directed him, by a gesture, to a long alley bordered on either side with buildings. This passage led to the drawbridge, that is, to the real entrance.

The drawbridge was lowered, service was about to begin. The sentinel of the outer body-guard stopped Aramis, and asked him roughly the cause of his coming thither.

Aramis explained with his usual courtesy that the reason which brought him was his desire to speak with M. Baise-meaux de Montlezun.

The first sentinel called to the second stationed in an inner lodge. The latter put his head to the grating and gazed closely at the new arrival. Aramis reiterated his wish. The sentinel at once called to a subaltern who was walking about in a rather spacious court-yard, and who, hearing what was wanted, ran to find an officer of the governor's staff.

The latter, having listened to the request of Aramis, begged him to wait a moment, went off a few steps, and then returned to ask his name.

"I cannot tell you, monsieur," said Aramis, "but know that I have matters of such importance to communicate to the governor that I can answer for one thing in advance — that is that M. de Baiseaux will be delighted to see me. Furthermore, when you have told him that I am the one he expects on June first, I am convinced that he will hasten here himself."

The officer could not help thinking that a man as important as the governor would not inconvenience himself for another man as unimportant as the little citizen on the horse seemed to be.

"Really, monsieur, this happens most fortunately. The governor is preparing to go out; you can see his carriage

harnessed in the court-yard; there will be no need, therefore, for him to come to you, since he will see you as he passes."

Aramis bowed in sign of assent; he did not wish to give too exalted an idea of himself; therefore he waited patiently and in silence, leaning over the saddle-bow of his horse. Ten minutes had not passed when the governor's carriage was seen to move. It approached the door. The governor appeared, stepped into it, and it made ready to start.

The same ceremony took place for the master as for a suspected stranger; the sentinel of the lodge advanced just as the carriage was about to pass under the arch, and the governor, the first to obey the orders, opened the door. In that way the sentinel could be sure that no unauthorized person left the Bastille.

The carriage rolled under the arch; but just as the iron gate was opened the officer approached the vehicle thus stopped for the second time, and spoke a few words to the governor. The latter at once put his head out of the door and saw Aramis on horseback at the end of the drawbridge. Immediately he gave a great cry of joy, stepped or rather sprang out of his carriage, and ran to seize the hands of Aramis, making a thousand apologies. He did everything but kiss him.

"What difficulty in entering the Bastille, monsieur! Is it the same for those who are sent here against their will as for those who come of their own accord?"

"Pardon, pardon! Ah! my lord, what joy I feel at seeing your grace!"

"Hush! What are you thinking of, my dear M. de Baise-meaux? What do you suppose one would think at seeing a bishop in my present attire?"

"Ah! pardon, I never thought of it. Take monsieur's horse to the stable!" cried Baisemeaux.

"No, no," said Aramis, "the deuce!"

"Why not?"

"Because there are five thousand pistoles in the saddle-bags."

The governor's face became so radiant that the prisoners, had they seen it, would have thought that some prince of the blood had come to pay him a visit.

"Yes, yes, you are right; the horse shall be led to the government house. My dear M. d'Herblay, shall we get into the carriage and drive back to my house?"

"Get into a carriage to cross a court, monsieur? Do you

consider me such an invalid? No, on foot, monsieur, on foot."

Baisemeaux thereupon offered his arm, but the prelate did not avail himself of it. Thus they reached the government house, Baisemeaux rubbing his hands and glancing at the horse out of the corner of his eye, Aramis looking at the bare, black walls. A rather fine vestibule, a straight, white stone staircase led to the apartments of Baisemeaux. The governor crossed the ante-chamber and the dining-room, in which breakfast was in preparation, opened a small secret door, and shut himself and his guest up in a large closet, the windows of which opened obliquely upon the court-yards and the stables.

Baisemeaux installed the prelate with that politeness of which only a good man or a grateful man knows the secret. An armchair, a cushion at his feet, a small table on which to lean his arm, — all these the governor himself prepared. He also placed on the table, with pious care, the bag of gold which one of the soldiers had brought up with no less reverence than a priest would show in bringing in the holy sacrament. The soldier withdrew. Baisemeaux closed the door behind him, drew a curtain across the window, and gazed into the eyes of Aramis to see if the prelate lacked anything.

"Well, my lord," said he, without seating himself, "so you continue to be the most faithful of all men of their word."

"In business matters, dear M. de Baisemeaux, promptness is not a virtue, it is a simple duty."

"Yes, in business, I understand; but this is not a question of business, my lord; it is a service you are rendering me."

"Come, come, dear M. Baisemeaux, admit that in spite of my promptness you have not been without a little anxiety?"

"About your health, yes, certainly," stammered Baisemeaux.

"I wanted to come yesterday, but was unable to do so, for I was too tired," continued Aramis.

Baisemeaux hastened to slip another cushion behind his guest's back.

"But," went on Aramis, "I promised myself to come and pay you a visit early this morning."

"You are most kind, my lord."

"And it was well I came promptly, it seems to me."

"Why so?"

"You were going out."

Baisemeaux colored.

"Yes, I was."

"Then I am inconveniencing you?"

The embarrassment of Baisemeaux became more visible.

"Then I weary you," continued Aramis, fixing his keen glance on the poor governor. "Had I known that I would not have come."

"Ah, my lord, how can you think you ever weary me?"

"Confess that you were going in search of money."

"No," stammered Baisemeaux; "no, I swear to you, I was going —"

"Is monsieur still going to M. Fouquet's?" cried out the major from below. Baisemeaux ran to the window like a madman.

"No, no," he cried in despair. "Who in the devil is speaking of M. Fouquet? Are you drunk down there? Why am I interrupted when I am engaged in business?"

"You were going to M. Fouquet's," said Aramis, compressing his lips; "to the abbé or the superintendent?"

Baisemeaux had a great desire to lie, but lacked the courage.

"To the superintendent's."

"Then you see clearly that you were in need of money, since you were going to one who gives it away."

"Why, no, my lord."

"Come, you were afraid of me."

"My dear lord, the mere uncertainty, the mere ignorance in which I was as to where you lived —"

"Oh! you would have had money at M. Fouquet's, dear M. Baisemeaux, for he is a man whose hand is always open."

"I swear that I should never have dared ask money from M. Fouquet. I wanted to ask him for your address; that was all."

"My address from M. Fouquet?" cried Aramis, opening his eyes in spite of himself.

"Why," said Baisemeaux, troubled by the look of the priest, "why, yes, from M. Fouquet."

"There is no harm in that, dear M. Baisemeaux. I merely ask why seek my address from him?"

"In order to write to you."

"I understand," said Aramis, smiling; "but that is not what I meant. I do not ask you why you wanted my address; I ask you why you went to M. Fouquet for it."

"Oh!" said Baisemeaux, "because M. Fouquet, having Belle-Isle —"

"Well?"

"Belle-Isle, which is in the diocese of Vannes, and because you are Bishop of Vannes —"

"Dear M. de Baisemeaux, since you knew that I am Bishop of Vannes, you had no need to ask my address from M. Fouquet."

"Well, monsieur," said Baisemeaux, at bay, "have I committed an indiscretion? If so, I beg your pardon."

"Come, now! And in what could you have committed an indiscretion?" asked Aramis, calmly.

And while composing his face and smiling at the governor, Aramis wondered how Baisemeaux, who had not known his address, knew that Vannes was his residence.

"I will clear this up," said he to himself. Then aloud:

"Come, my dear governor, shall we make out our little accounts?"

"At your orders, my lord; but tell me beforehand —"

"What?"

"Will you not do me the honor of breakfasting with me, as usual?"

"Yes, willingly."

"That is well."

Baisemeaux struck a bell three times.

"That means?" asked Aramis.

"That I have some one for breakfast, and that they are to act accordingly."

"Ah, the devil! And you strike three times! You seem, my dear governor, to be acting formally with me."

"Oh! the idea! Besides, the very least I can do is to receive you as well as I can."

"Why?"

"Because there is no prince who has done for me what you have done."

"Come, now!"

"No, no."

"Let us speak of other things. Or, rather, tell me, are things going all right at the Bastille?"

"Oh, yes."

"Do the prisoners contribute?"

"None too much."

"The devil!"

"M. de Mazarin was not hard enough."

"Ah, yes, you must have a suspicious government like our ancient cardinal's."

"Yes, under him matters went well. The brother of his gray Eminence made his fortune there."

"Believe me, my dear governor," said Aramis, approaching Baisemeaux, "a young king is worth an old cardinal. Youth has its suspicions, its fits of anger, its passions, as old age has its hatreds, its precautions, its fears. Have you paid your three years' profits to Louvière and Tremblay?"

"Yes, indeed."

"So that there remains nothing further for you to give them than the fifty thousand livres I bring you?"

"No."

"Nothing saved, then?"

"Ah, my lord, in giving fifty thousand livres of mine to these gentlemen, I swear that I give them all I make. This is what I said last evening to M. d'Artagnan."

"Ah!" said Aramis, whose eyes sparkled, but immediately became serious again.

"Ah, yesterday you saw D'Artagnan? And how is this dear friend?"

"Wonderfully well."

"And what did you say to him, M. de Baisemeaux?"

"I said to him," continued the governor, without perceiving his own stupidity, "I said to him that I fed my prisoners too well."

"How many have you?" asked Aramis, carelessly.

"Sixty."

"So? That is quite a round number."

"Oh, monsieur, at one time there used to be two hundred."

"But still a minimum of sixty is not very much to complain of."

"No, certainly, for to any one but myself each one would bring in one hundred and fifty pistoles."

"A hundred and fifty pistoles!"

"The deuce! just calculate; for a prince of the blood, for instance, I get fifty livres a day."

"Only you have no prince of the blood; or, at least, I suppose so," said Aramis, with a slight tremor in his voice.

"No, thank God! that is, no — unfortunately."

"Why unfortunately?"

"Of course my position would be benefited by it."

"That is true."

"I get fifty livres for a prince of the blood."

"Yes."

"For a marshal of France, thirty-six livres —"

"But you have no more marshals of France at present than you have princes of the blood, have you?"

"Alas! no; it is true that lieutenant-generals and brigadiers pay twenty-four livres, and I have two of them."

"Oh!"

"After that there are the councillors of parliament, who bring me fifteen livres."

"And how many of these have you?"

"Four."

"I did not know that councillors were such good revenue."

"Yes, but from fifteen livres I fall at once to ten."

"To ten?"

"Yes, for an ordinary judge or an ecclesiastic, ten livres."

"And you have seven? Good work!"

"No, bad."

"How so?"

"How could you expect that I would treat these poor fellows who amount to something any differently from what I treat a councillor of parliament?"

"Yes, you are right, I do not see five livres' difference between them."

"You understand, if I have a fine fish I always pay four or five livres for it; if I have a fine fowl it costs me a livre and a half. I fatten many pupils of the poultry-yard; but I have to buy grain, and you cannot imagine the army of rats we have here."

"Well, why not set against them half a dozen cats?"

"Ah, yes, cats; they eat them. I was forced to give them up, for you may imagine how they treated my grain. I am forced to have terriers which I have sent me from England to kill the rats. The dogs have a ferocious appetite. They eat as much as a prisoner of the fifth order, without counting the fact that they sometimes kill my rabbits and fowls."

Was Aramis listening or not? No one could have told. His downcast eyes showed the attentive man, his restless hand showed the man absorbed.

Aramis was meditating.

"I was telling you," continued Baisemeaux, "that a good-sized fowl costs me a livre and a half, and that a good fish costs me four or five livres. We serve three meals in the Bastille; the prisoners have nothing to do and are always eating. A man of ten livres costs me seven livres ten sous."

"But you told me that those of ten livres you treated like those of fifteen?"

"Yes, certainly."

"Very good! Then you gain seven livres ten sous on those of fifteen livres."

"One must compensate one's self," said Baisemeaux, who saw that he had given himself away.

"You are right, dear governor, but have you not some prisoners for less than ten livres?"

"Oh, yes, we have citizens and lawyers."

"Good. At how much?"

"At five livres."

"Do they eat too?"

"By heaven! You must understand that they are not given a sole or a chicken every day, nor Spanish wines at every meal either, and yet three times a week they have a good dish for their dinner."

"Why, that is philanthropy, my dear governor, and you must be ruining yourself."

"No, understand me. If the fifteen-livre prisoner does not eat his fowl, or if the ten-livre prisoner leaves a good remnant, I send it to the five-livre ones; it is a feast for the poor devils, and what would you expect? One must be charitable."

"What do you get on the five livres?"

"Thirty sous."

"Well, you are an honest man, Baisemeaux!"

"Thank you."

"No, I mean it, really."

"Thank you, my lord. But I think that you are right now. Do you know why I suffer?"

"No."

"Well, it is for the small tradesmen and the bailiff's clerks rated at three livres. They do not often see carps from the Rhine or channel sturgeon."

"Good! But do not the five-livre prisoners chance to leave any scraps?"

"Oh, my lord, do not believe that I am as stingy as that; I overwhelm with happiness the small tradesman or the bailiff's clerk, by giving him the wing of a red partridge, a filet of venison, a slice of truffled pastry, dishes which he never tasted save in dreams; in fact, they are the scraps of the twenty-four livre prisoners; he eats, drinks, and at dessert he cries, 'Long live the King!' and blesses the Bastille. With two bottles of champagne, which cost me five sous, I make him drunk every Sunday. Oh! they bless me, they are sorry when they leave the prison. Do you know what I have noticed?"

"No, indeed."

"Well, I have noticed — and do you know that it is a blessing for my house? — well, I have noticed that certain prisoners who have been freed have had themselves imprisoned again at once. Why should this be done if not in order to enjoy my kitchen? Oh! This is really true."

Aramis smiled doubtfully.

"You smile?"

"Yes."

"I tell you that we have some names enrolled three times in the space of two years."

"I must see before I believe."

"Oh! I can show you, although we are forbidden to let strangers see the registers."

"I suppose so."

"But, my lord, if you wish to see it with your own eyes —"

"I confess I would be delighted."

"Very well."

Baisemeaux went to a cupboard and drew out a large volume. Aramis followed him eagerly with his eyes.

Baisemeaux returned, laid the register on the table, turned over the leaves for a moment, and paused at the letter *M*.

"Look," said he, "you may see for yourself."

"What?"

"'Martinier, January, 1659; Martinier, June, 1660; Martinier, March, 1661. Pamphlets, Mazarinades, etc.' You see that it was only a pretext. They were not imprisoned in the Bastille for jokes against M. Mazarin; the fellow denounced himself in order that he might be imprisoned. And with what object, monsieur? For the purpose of returning to eat my menu at three livres."



ARAMIS MECHANICALLY TURNED THE LEAVES OF THE REGISTER.



"Three livres! Poor wretches!"

"Yes, my lord, the poet belongs to the lowest stage, the menu of the small tradesman and of the bailiff's clerk; but as I told you, it is just to those that I give such surprises."

Aramis mechanically turned the leaves of the register, continuing to read, but without appearing to take any interest in the names.

"In 1661, you see," said Baisemeaux, "eighty entries; in 1659, eighty."

"Ah! Seldon," said Aramis, "I know that name, it seems to me. Was it not you who spoke to me about a young man?"

"Yes, yes! a poor devil of a student who made — what do you call it when two Latin verses rhyme?"

"A distich."

"Yes, that is it."

"Poor fellow! For a distich."

"The deuce! How you do go on! Do you know that he made this distich against the Jesuits?"

"That makes no difference, the punishment seems to me very severe."

"Do not pity him; last year you seemed to be interested in him."

"No doubt."

"Well, as your interest is all-powerful here, my lord, since then I have treated him as a fifteen-livre prisoner."

"Like this one, then," said Aramis, who had continued to turn the leaves, and who now stopped at one of the names which followed that of Martinier.

"Yes, like that one."

"Is this Marchiali an Italian?" asked Aramis, pointing to the name which had attracted his attention.

"Hush!" said Baisemeaux.

"Why hush?" asked Aramis, involuntarily clinching his white hand.

"I thought I had already spoken to you of this Marchiali."

"No, this is the first time I have heard the name."

"Possibly; but I have spoken to you about him without mentioning his name."

"Is he an old offender?" asked Aramis, trying to smile.

"No, he is quite young, on the contrary."

"Ah! his crime is great, then?"

"Unpardonable."

"He has assassinated?"

"Bah!"

"Burned anything?"

"Bah!"

"Calumniated?"

"Oh! no, he is the one who —"

And Baisemeaux leaned towards Aramis' ear, making an ear-trumpet of his hands.

"He is the one who allowed himself to resemble the —"

"Ah, yes, yes," said Aramis; "I know; you spoke to me about it last year; but the crime appeared to me very slight."

"Slight?"

"Or, rather, involuntary."

"My lord, it is not involuntarily that one detects such a resemblance."

"Well, as a matter of fact, I had forgotten it. But, my dear host," said Aramis, "I think we are sent for."

Baisemeaux took the register, carried it hastily back to the cupboard, which he locked, and put the key into his pocket.

"Will it please you to breakfast now, my lord? For you are not mistaken. We are summoned to eat."

"As you will, my dear governor."

And they passed into the dining-room.

CHAPTER V.

THE BREAKFAST WITH M. DE BAISEMEAUX.

ARAMIS was usually temperate; but this time, while managing carefully about the wine, he did full honor to Baisemeaux's breakfast, which, for that matter, was excellent.

The host, on his part, was animation itself. The sight of the five thousand pistoles, on which from time to time he turned his eyes, opened his heart. Now and then, too, he looked at Aramis with gentle tenderness. The latter leaned back in his chair and took from his glass a few sips of wine in the manner of a connoisseur.

"Let no one come to me to speak ill of the fare at the Bastille," said Aramis, half closing his eyes; "happy the prisoners who have even half a bottle of this Burgundy every day!"

"All the fifteen-franc ones drink it," said Baisemeaux. "It is very old Volnay."

"And our poor student, our poor Seldon, has he this excellent Volnay?"

"Oh, no!"

"I thought I heard you say that he was one of the fifteen-livre prisoners."

"He? Never! A man who makes districts! How could I have told you that?"

"Distiches."

"At fifteen livres? Come, now! It is his neighbor who is a fifteen-livre prisoner."

"His neighbor?"

"Yes."

"Which one?"

"The other; the second Bertaudière."

"My dear governor, excuse me; but you speak a language for which an apprenticeship is absolutely necessary."

"Very true, I beg pardon. The second Bertaudière, you see, is the one who occupies the second story of the tower of the Bertaudière."

"So Bertaudière is the name of one of the towers of the Bastille? The fact is, I have heard that each tower has a name. Where is this one?"

"Look," said Baisemeaux, going to the window. "It is the second to the left."

"So! And the fifteen-livre prisoner is there?"

"Yes."

"When did he come?"

"Oh, the devil! Some seven or eight years ago."

"What do you mean by some? Do you not know your dates more exactly?"

"It was not in my time, dear D'Herblay."

"But it seems to me that Louvière or Tremblay would have told you."

"Oh, my dear monsieur, you must pardon me."

"No matter. You were saying?"

"That the secrets of the Bastille are not handed over with the keys of the governorship."

"Indeed! Then this prisoner's case is a mystery, a state secret?"

"Oh, no! I do not think it is a state secret; it is a secret like everything else at the Bastille."

"Very good," said Aramis; "but why, then, do you speak more freely of Seldon than of —"

"The second Bertaudière?"

"Yes."

"Why, because in my opinion the crime of a man who has made a distich is less than that of one who resembles —"

"Yes, yes, I see; but the jailers?"

"The jailers?"

"They talk with your prisoners."

"No doubt."

"And your prisoners must tell them that they are not guilty."

"They say nothing but that; it is the regular formula; the general song."

"Yes, but this resemblance of which you were speaking just now?"

"Well?"

"Does it not strike the turnkeys?"

"Oh, my dear M. d'Herblay, one must be a courtier like you to trouble about such details."

"You are right, my dear M. de Baisemeaux, — a thousand times right. Another drop of this Volnay, I beg of you."

"Not a drop, but a full glass."

"No, no! You have remained a musketeer to the tips of your fingers, while I have become a bishop. A drop for me, a glass for you."

"So be it."

Aramis and the governor touched glasses.

"But," said Aramis, fixing his bright glance on the ruby liquid raised on a level with his eyes, as if he wished to enjoy it with every sense at once, "but that which you call a resemblance, another might not notice, perhaps."

"Oh, yes! Any one would if he knew the one he resembles."

"I think, dear M. de Baisemeaux, that it is simply a matter of imagination on your part."

"No, on my honor."

"Listen," continued Aramis, "I have seen many like the one of whom we are speaking, but out of respect no one mentioned it."

"No doubt because there are resemblances and resem-

blances ; this one is striking, and were you to see him — ”

“ Well ? ”

“ You yourself would admit it.”

“ If I were to see him,” said Aramis, abstractedly ; “ and yet in all probability that will never be.”

“ Why not ? ”

“ Because if I were to put my foot into one of those horrid cells, I should think I were buried forever.”

“ Not at all ; the cells are good places.”

“ No.”

“ What do you mean by ‘ no ’ ? ”

“ I honestly do not believe you ; that is all.”

“ Please do not speak ill of the second Bertaudière. It is a good place, furnished very nicely, and carpeted.”

“ The devil ! ”

“ Yes, the fellow has not been unhappy ; the best lodging of the Bastille has been his. There is a chance for you ! ”

“ Come, come,” said Aramis, coldly, “ you will never make me believe there are good rooms in the Bastille ; and as to your carpets — ”

“ Well, as to my carpets ? ”

“ Well, they exist only in your imagination. I see spiders, rats, and even toads.”

“ Toads ? Oh, so far as the dungeons are concerned I will not say.”

“ And I see mighty little furniture and no carpets at all.”

“ Are you the man to be convinced by your eyes ? ” said Baise-
meaux, suddenly.

“ No, forsooth ! No ! ”

“ Not even to make sure of this resemblance which you deny as you do the carpet ? ”

“ Some spectre, some shadow, a dying wretch.”

“ No, no ! The gayest fellow in the world.”

“ Sad, and ill-tempered ? ”

“ Not at all ; lively.”

“ Come, now ! ”

“ That is the word — ”

“ Impossible.”

“ Come.”

“ Where ? ”

“ With me.”

“ Why ? ”

"To make a tour of the Bastille."

"How?"

"You shall see for yourself, with your own eyes."

"But the regulations?"

"Oh! never mind them. It is the day for my major's leave of absence; the lieutenant is making his round of the bastions, and we are our own masters."

"No, no, dear governor; even the thought of the scraping of the bolts we should have to draw makes me shudder."

"Well?"

"You might forget me in some third or fourth Bertaudière. Ugh!"

"You are joking?"

"No, I am speaking seriously."

"You refuse an unusual opportunity. Do you know that in order to obtain the favor I propose giving you certain princes of the blood have offered as much as fifty thousand livres?"

"Really, it is very interesting, then."

"Forbidden fruit, my lord; forbidden fruit! you who belong to the church ought to know that."

"No. Had I any curiosity, it would be for the poor author of the distich."

"Well, let us see him; he occupies the third Bertaudière."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because, so far as I am concerned, if I had any curiosity it would be for the beautiful carpeted room and its lodger."

"Bah! furniture is commonplace; an insignificant face is devoid of interest."

"A fifteen-livre prisoner, my lord, a fifteen-livre prisoner is always interesting."

"Oh, I forgot to ask you about that. Why fifteen livres for him and only three for poor Seldon?"

"You see, the distinction is a fine one, monsieur; in it one sees the kindness of the King."

"Of the King? the King?"

"Of the cardinal, I mean. 'This poor wretch,' said M. de Mazarin himself, — 'this poor wretch is destined to live forever in prison.'"

"Why?"

"The devil! it seems to me that his crime is lasting; and that consequently the punishment ought to be so too."

"Lasting?"

"Yes, unless he has the luck to catch the small-pox, you understand, — and even this chance is rare, for there is no bad air in the Bastille."

"Your logic is as clever as possible, dear M. de Baisemeaux."

"Is it not?"

"You meant to say, then, that this wretched man must suffer without interruption or termination —"

"I did not say 'suffer,' my lord; a fifteen-livre prisoner does not suffer."

"He suffers imprisonment, at least."

"No doubt; that is fate; but his suffering is softened for him. You must admit that this fellow did not come into the world to eat all the good things he does eat. You shall see. We have here this pastry which has not been touched, these crawfish from the Marne, as large as lobsters; look! Well, all this will be taken to the second Bertaudière with a bottle of the Volnay which you find so good. Having seen, you will no longer doubt, I trust."

"No, my dear governor, no; but in all that you are thinking only of the very happy fifteen-livre prisoner, and you always forget poor Seldon, my *protégé*."

"Well, out of consideration for you it shall be a gala day for him; he shall have some biscuits and preserves with this bottle of port."

"You are a good fellow, as I have already said, and now I repeat it, my dear Baisemeaux."

"Let us start," said the governor, somewhat muddled, partly from the wine he had drunk and partly from the praises of Aramis.

"Remember that what I do is merely to oblige you," said the prelate.

"Oh, you shall thank me on returning."

"Let us start, then."

"Wait until I summon the jailer."

Baisemeaux rang twice; a man appeared.

"I am going to the towers," said the governor. "No guards, no drums, in short, no noise whatever!"

"If I were not leaving my cloak here," said Aramis, pretending to be afraid, "I should really think I were going to prison on my own account."

The jailer preceded the governor, Aramis walking on the

right. Some scattered soldiers in the court-yard drew themselves up as stiff as posts as the governor passed. Baisemeaux made his host descend several steps leading to a sort of esplanade. Thence they came to the drawbridge, where the sentinels received the governor and saluted him.

"Monsieur," then said the governor, turning towards Aramis and speaking so that the sentinels should not lose a word; "monsieur, you have a good memory, have you not?"

"Why?" asked Aramis.

"For your plans and your measurements; you know it is not allowed even to architects to enter the prisoner's cells with paper, pens, or a pencil."

"Good," said Aramis to himself; "it seems that I am an architect. Is not this another joke of D'Artagnan, who saw in me the engineer of Belle-Isle?"

Then aloud:

"Be easy, monsieur; in our profession a glance and a good memory suffice."

Baisemeaux did not move a muscle, the guards took Aramis for what he seemed to be.

"Well, let us go first to the Bertaudière," said Baisemeaux, still with the intention of being overheard by the sentinels.

"Yes," replied Aramis.

Then turning to the turnkey:

"You will take the opportunity," said he, "of carrying to Number 2 the dainties I pointed out."

"You always forget Number 3, dear M. de Baisemeaux."

"That is true."

They ascended the stairs. The number of bolts, gratings, and locks in that one court-yard would have answered for the safety of an entire city. Aramis was neither a dreamer nor a sensitive man; he had composed verses in his youth, but at heart he was hard, as is every man of fifty-five who has greatly loved women, or, rather, who has been greatly loved by them. But when he placed his foot on the worn stone steps over which so many wretches had passed, when he felt himself impregnated by the atmosphere of those sombre dungeons, damp with tears, he was overcome beyond a doubt, for his head was lowered, his eyes grew troubled, and he followed Baisemeaux without uttering a word.

CHAPTER VI.

THE SECOND STORY OF THE BERTAUDIÈRE.

At the second floor, whether from fatigue or emotion, the visitor's breath failed him. He leaned against the wall.

"Will you begin with this one?" said Baisemeaux, "since we are going from one to the other it matters little, it seems to me, whether we go from the second to the third, or from the third to the second. Besides, there are certain repairs to be made in this room," he hastened to add for the benefit of the turnkey, who was within hearing.

"No, no," cried Aramis, eagerly, "higher, higher, monsieur, if you please; the higher is the more urgent." They continued to ascend.

"Ask the jailer for the keys," whispered Aramis, in a low tone.

"Willingly."

Baisemeaux took the keys, and himself opened the door of the third chamber. The turnkey entered first and laid on a table the provisions which the good governor had called dainties. Then he left. The prisoner had not stirred.

Baisemeaux then entered in his turn, while Aramis stood on the threshold. From that place he saw a young man, a youth of eighteen, who raised his head at the unusual sound, jumped off the bed, and perceiving the governor, clasped his hands and began to cry, "My mother! my mother!"

The young man's tones were so full of grief that Aramis shivered in spite of himself.

"My dear guest," said Baisemeaux, trying to smile, "I bring you at once both a diversion and an extra, the one for the mind and the other for the body. Here is the gentleman who is to take some measurements, and here are some preserves for your dessert."

"Oh, monsieur, monsieur!" said the young man, "leave me solitary for a year, feed me on bread and water for a year, but tell me that at the end of that time I shall go away from here, tell me that at the end of a year I shall see my mother again."

"But, my dear friend," said Baisemeaux, "I heard you say

to yourself that your mother was very poor, that you were very badly lodged with her, while here — the deuce!"

"Were she poor, monsieur, so much the more reason for one to give her his support. Poorly lodged with her? Oh, monsieur, one is always well lodged when one is free."

"In short, since you yourself say that you did nothing but write that unfortunate distich —"

"And unintentionally, monsieur, absolutely unintentionally, I swear to you; I was reading 'Martial' when the idea came to me. Oh! monsieur, let me be punished, let my hand with which I have written be cut off. I will work with the other; but give me back my mother."

"My boy," said Baisemeaux, "you know that this does not depend on me; I can only increase your rations, give you a little glass of port, slip a biscuit between two plates."

"Oh, my God! my God!" cried the young man, throwing himself back and rolling on the floor.

Incapable of longer supporting this scene, Aramis withdrew to the landing.

"Poor wretch!" he murmured.

"Oh, yes, monsieur, he is very wretched; but it is the fault of his parents."

"How so?"

"Why did they have him learn Latin? Too much science, you see, monsieur, that does harm. I can neither read nor write; so I am not in prison."

Aramis looked at the man who called being a jailer in the Bastille not being in prison.

Baisemeaux, seeing that his counsels and his port wine were of no avail, left the cell, greatly troubled.

"Well! And the door! The door!" said the jailer; "you forgot to shut the door!"

"That is true," said Baisemeaux. "Here, take the keys."

"I will ask pardon for this boy," said Aramis.

"And if you do not obtain it," said Baisemeaux, "at least ask that they bring him to the ten livres; by that we will both gain."

"If the other prisoner also calls for his mother," said Aramis, "I prefer not to go in; I will make my measurements from the outside."

"Oh!" said the jailer, "do not fear, Monsieur Architect, the other is as gentle as a lamb; to call his mother, he would have to speak, and he never speaks."

"Let us enter, then," said Aramis, dully.

"Oh, monsieur," said the turnkey, "are you the architect of the prisons?"

"Yes."

"And you are not more accustomed to all this? That is surprising." Aramis saw that in order to avoid arousing suspicions he must summon all his strength to his aid. Baisemeaux had the keys and opened the door.

"Stay outside," said he to the jailer, "and wait for us at the bottom of the steps." The jailer obeyed and withdrew.

Baisemeaux entered first and opened the second door himself. Then there was seen in the square of light which filtered through the iron-barred window a handsome young man, short of stature, with closely-cropped hair and an already growing beard. He was seated on a stool, his elbow on an armchair and all the upper part of his body reclining against it. His clothes, thrown on the bed, were of fine black velvet, and he was inhaling the fresh air blowing against his breast, which was covered with a shirt of the finest possible cambric.

As the governor entered the young man turned his head with a movement of indifference, but on recognizing Baisemeaux he arose and saluted him courteously. When his eyes fell on Aramis, standing in the shadow, the latter trembled, turned pale, and his hat, which he held in his hand, fell from him as if all his muscles had relaxed at once. Meantime Baisemeaux, accustomed to the presence of his prisoner, did not seem to feel any of the sensations which Aramis felt; he laid on the table his pastry and his crawfish, as a servant full of zeal would have done. Thus occupied, he did not notice the anxious look of his guest. But when he had finished he spoke to the young prisoner.

"You look well," said he; "that is good."

"I am very well, monsieur, thank you," replied the young man. The voice almost stunned Aramis. In spite of himself he took a step forward, with trembling lips. The movement was so visible that it could not escape Baisemeaux, occupied as he was.

"Here is an architect who is to examine your chimney," said Baisemeaux; "does it smoke?"

"Never, monsieur."

"You said that one could not be happy in prison," said the governor, rubbing his hands. "Yet here is a prisoner who is. You do not complain, I trust?"

"Never."

"You are not tired?" asked Aramis.

"Never."

"So!" said Baisemeaux in a low tone, "was I not right?"

"The dence, my dear governor! What can you expect! One must yield to evidence. Is it allowed to ask him questions?"

"As many as you wish."

"Well, do me the kindness to ask him if he knows why he is here."

"Monsieur requests me to ask you," said Baisemeaux, "if you know the reason for your imprisonment."

"No, monsieur," said the young man, simply, "I do not."

"But that is impossible," said Aramis, carried away in spite of himself. "If you were ignorant of the cause of your detention, you would be furious."

"I was during the first day."

"Why are you so no longer?"

"Because I have reflected."

"That is strange," said Aramis.

"Is it not odd?" said Baisemeaux.

"And about what did you reflect?" asked Aramis; "may one ask you, monsieur?"

"I reflected that, having committed no crime, God could not punish me."

"But what is the prison, then," asked Aramis, "if it is not a punishment?"

"Alas!" said the young man, "I do not know; all I can tell you is that it is entirely the contrary to what I said seven years ago."

"To hear you, monsieur, to see your resignation, one would be tempted to believe that you liked the prison."

"I endure it."

"In the certainty of being free some day?"

"I have no certainty, monsieur; I have hope, that is all; and yet every day I admit this hope grows less."

"But why should you not be free since you have already been so?"

"That is just the reason," replied the young man, "that prevents my expecting liberty; why should they have imprisoned me if they intended freeing me later?"

"How old are you?"

"I do not know."

"What is your name?"

"I have forgotten the name I had."

"Your parents?"

"I never knew them."

"But those who brought you up?"

"They did not call me their son."

"Did you love any one before coming here?"

"I loved my nurse and my flowers."

"Was that all?"

"I also loved my valet."

"You miss this nurse and this valet?"

"I cried a great deal when they died."

"Have they died since you came here or before?"

"They died the evening before I was carried off."

"At the same time?"

"Yes."

"And how were you carried off?"

"A man came for me, made me get into a carriage, which was closed and locked, and brought me here."

"Would you recognize that man again?"

"He wore a mask."

"Is not the story an extraordinary one?" said Baisemeaux in a low tone to Aramis.

Aramis could scarcely breathe.

"Yes, very extraordinary," said he.

"But that which is still more extraordinary is that he has never told me as much as he has just told you."

"Perhaps it is because you have never questioned him," said Aramis.

"That is possible," replied Baisemeaux; "I am not inquisitive. You see the room; it is fine, is it not?"

"Very."

"A carpet —"

"Superb."

"I'll wager that he had nothing like it before coming here."

"I believe that."

Then turning to the young man:

"Do you never remember having been visited by a strange man or woman?" he asked.

"Oh, yes; three times by a woman, who every time came in

a carriage to the door, and entered covered with a veil which she did not raise until the door was closed and we were alone."

"Do you remember the woman?"

"Yes."

"What did she say to you?"

The young man smiled sadly. "She asked me what you have just asked me — if I were happy or growing tired."

"And when she arrived or left?"

"She pressed me in her arms, held me close to her heart, and kissed me."

"You remember her?"

"Perfectly."

"I am asking if you remember her features?"

"Yes."

"Then you would recognize her if chance brought her to you or you to her?"

"Oh, certainly."

A flash of fleeting satisfaction passed across Aramis' face. At that moment Baisemeaux heard the jailer, who had returned.

"Shall we go?" said he hastily to Aramis.

Probably Aramis knew all that he wished to know.

"When you wish," said he. The young man saw them prepare to leave and saluted them politely.

Baisemeaux replied by a mere bow. Aramis, made respectful no doubt by the young man's misfortune, bowed low to the prisoner.

They went out: Baisemeaux closed the door behind them.

"Well!" said Baisemeaux on the stairs, "what do you say to all that?"

"I have discovered the secret, my dear governor."

"Bah! And what is the secret?"

"There was a murder committed in that house."

"Come now!"

"The valet and the nurse dead the same day."

"Well?"

"Poison."

"Ah!"

"What do you think?"

"That it may be true. What! that young man an assassin?"

"Who told you that? What makes you think the poor fellow may be an assassin?"

"What I told you."

"The crime was committed in his house; that is enough. Perhaps he saw the criminals, and it was feared he might tell."

"The devil! if I knew that."

"Well?"

"I would redouble the guard."

"Oh, he does not seem to wish to escape."

"Oh, you do not know prisoners."

"Has he books?"

"Never; we are absolutely forbidden to give them."

"Absolutely?"

"By M. Mazarin's own hand."

"Have you this note?"

"Yes, my lord; do you wish to see it on returning for your cloak?"

"Very much; autographs please me very much."

"This one is perfectly authentic, there is only one erasure in it."

"Ah! an erasure, and in what connection?"

"In connection with a figure."

"A figure?"

"Yes. This is what there was first: Board at fifty livres."

"Like princes of the blood, then?"

"But the cardinal must have seen that he was mistaken, you see, he rubbed out the zero and added a 1 before the 5. But —"

"What?"

"You do not speak of the resemblance."

"I do not speak of it, dear M. de Baisemeaux, for a very simple reason: I do not speak of it because it does not exist."

"Oh, the idea!"

"Or that if it exists, it is in your imagination; and that even should it exist elsewhere, I think you would do well not to speak of it."

"Really!"

"King Louis XIV., you understand, would be mortally offended with you if he learned that you helped spread the report that one of his subjects had the audacity to resemble him."

"That is true," said Baisemeaux, thoroughly startled; "but I have spoken of the matter only to you, and you understand, my lord, that I count on your discretion."

"Oh, be easy."

"Do you still wish to see the note?" said Baisemeaux, agitated.

"Certainly."

Conversing thus, they returned. Baisemeaux drew from the cupboard a private register similar to the one he had already shown to Aramis, but fastened by a lock. The key which opened this lock was part of a small bunch which Baisemeaux always carried with him. Then placing the book on the table, he opened it to the letter *M* and showed to Aramis this note in the column of observations.

"No books; linen and clothes of the finest quality; no walks; no change of jailer; no communication with any one."

"Musical instruments; every liberty for comfort; fifteen livres for board. M. de Baisemeaux can put in further claim if the fifteen livres do not suffice."

"As a matter of fact," said Baisemeaux, "now that I think of it, I shall make a claim."

Aramis closed the book.

"Yes," said he, "that is indeed in M. de Mazarin's handwriting: I recognize it. Now, my dear governor," he continued, as if this last communication had exhausted his interest, "let us pass, if you will, to our little plans."

"Well! what time do you wish me to appoint? Settle it yourself."

"Do not fix any time. Give me simply an acknowledgment of one hundred and fifty thousand francs."

"Payable?"

"When I wish. But, you understand, I shall wish it only when you yourself wish it."

"Oh, I am quite easy," said Baisemeaux, smiling; "but I have already given you two receipts."

"And which you see I destroy."

And Aramis, after showing the two receipts to the governor, actually destroyed them.

Overcome by such a mark of confidence, Baisemeaux unhesitatingly wrote out an acknowledgment of one hundred and fifty thousand francs payable at the pleasure of the prelate.

Aramis, who had followed the pen by glancing over the governor's shoulder, put the note in his pocket without appearing to have read it, which put Baisemeaux entirely at his ease.

"Now," said Aramis, "you would not be angry with me, would you, if I were to carry off some prisoner?"

"How do you mean?"

"By obtaining his pardon, of course. Did I not tell you, for instance, that poor Seldon interested me?"

"Ah, that is true."

"Well?"

"It is your affair. Act as you please. I see that you have a long arm and an open hand."

"Adieu! Adieu!"

And Aramis left, carrying with him the blessings of the governor.

CHAPTER VII.

THE TWO FRIENDS.

At the time M. de Baisemeaux was showing Aramis the prisoners of the Bastille, a carriage stopped before the door of Madame de Bellière, and at that still early hour deposited on the balcony a young woman muffled in a silk hood. When they announced Madame Vanel to Madame de Bellière, the latter was occupied, or, rather, was absorbed in reading a letter which she quickly hid. She had scarcely finished her morning toilet, her maids being still in the adjoining room.

At the name and at the step of Marguerite Vanel, Madame de Bellière ran to meet her. She thought she saw in the eyes of her friend a look which was not one of health or of joy.

Marguerite kissed her, grasped her hands, and scarcely gave her time to speak.

"My dear," said she, "have you forgotten me? Are you, then, wholly given up to court pleasures?"

"I have not seen even the marriage fêtes."

"What are you doing, then?"

"I am getting ready to go to Bellière."

"To Bellière?"

"Yes."

"Rustic, then. I like to see you thus disposed. But you are pale."

"No. I am wonderfully well."

"So much the better. I was uneasy. Do you know what I have been told?"

"People say so many things."

"Oh, but this is unusual."

"How well you know how to interest your audience, Marguerite!"

"I was afraid of vexing you."

"Oh, never! You yourself have admired my evenness of disposition."

"Well! it is said that — ah! indeed, I can never tell you that."

"Let us talk no more about it," said Madame de Bellière, who divined some mischief in this preamble, but who, nevertheless, was consumed by curiosity.

"Well, my dear marquise, it has been said for some time that you mourn M. de Bellière much less than formerly, poor fellow!"

"It is an evil report, Marguerite; I regret and shall always regret my husband; but it is two years since he died. I am only twenty-eight, and grief for his loss ought not to control every action and thought of my life. You, Marguerite, a model wife, would not believe me were I to say so."

"Why not? you have such a tender heart!" replied Madame Vanel, spitefully.

"You too, Marguerite, and I have not seen that you let yourself be overcome by grief when your heart is wounded."

These words were a direct allusion to Marguerite's rupture with the superintendent. They were also a hidden reproach, but aimed directly at the young woman's heart.

As if she had waited only for this signal to discharge her shaft, Marguerite cried:

"Well, Élise, it is said you are in love," and she fixed her eyes on Madame de Bellière, who blushed involuntarily.

"One never hesitates about slandering women," replied the marquise, after a moment's silence.

"Oh! no one slanders you, Élise."

"What! people say I am in love and yet they do not slander me?"

"In the first place, if it is true, there is no slander, but only an evil report; in the second place, — for you did not let me finish, — the public does not say that you have abandoned yourself to this love. It paints you, on the contrary, as a virtuous, loving woman, armed with claws and teeth, shutting yourself up in

your own house as in a fortress, and in a fortress as impregnable as that of Danaë, although the tower of Danaë was made of brass."

"You have wit, Marguerite," said Madame de Bellière, trembling.

"You have always flattered me, Élise. In short, you are said to be incorruptible and unapproachable. You see now whether you are being slandered — but what are you dreaming about while I am speaking to you?"

"I?"

"Yes, you are scarlet and perfectly quiet."

"I am trying to find it," said the marquise, raising her beautiful eyes bright with dawning anger, "I am trying to find out to what you allude, you who are so learned in mythology, by comparing me to Danaë."

"Oh," said Marguerite, laughing, "you were trying to find out that?"

"Yes, do you not remember at the convent when we were trying to solve arithmetical problems, — ah, what I am about to tell you is learned, too, but it is my turn, — do you not remember that if one of the terms was given, we were to find the other? Try, therefore, try."

"But I cannot imagine what you mean."

"Nothing is simpler. You claim that I am in love, do you not?"

"So I have been told."

"Well, it is not said that I am in love with an abstraction. There must be some name in this report?"

"Yes, certainly, there is a name."

"Well, my dear, it is not odd that I should try to find the name, since you will not tell it."

"My dear marquise, on seeing you blush I did not think you would be long in trying to find it."

"It was the word 'Danaë' which surprised me. 'Danaë' means a shower of gold, does it not?"

"It means that the Jupiter of Danaë changed himself for her into a shower of gold."

"My lover, then — the one you give me —"

"Oh, I beg pardon; I am your friend and give you no one."

"Very well; but my enemies —"

"Do you wish me to tell you the name?"

"You have made me wait half an hour for it."

"You shall hear it. Do not be shocked, for he is a man of power."

"Good."

The marquise drove her sharp nails into her hands, like a patient at the approach of steel.

"He is a very rich man," continued Marguerite, "the richest, perhaps. It is —" The marquise closed her eyes for an instant. "It is the Duke of Buckingham," said Marguerite, bursting into laughter. The perfidy had been calculated with inconceivable skill. The name which fell in place of the name the marquise expected had the same effect on the poor woman as those badly sharpened axes that had hacked without killing MM. de Chalais and de Thou on their scaffolds. She recovered herself, however, and said :

"I was really right in calling you a witty woman, for you are giving me much pleasure. The joke is delightful. I have never seen the Duke of Buckingham."

"Never?" said Marguerite, pausing in her laughter.

"I have not put my foot outside of my house since the duke came to Paris."

"Oh!" resumed Madame Vanel, stretching out her mutinous foot towards a paper which lay on the carpet near the window; "one may not be seen, but one can write." The marquise trembled, for the paper was the envelope of the letter she had been reading when her friend arrived. This envelope was sealed with the arms of the superintendent. As she leaned back on her sofa, Madame de Bellière rolled the paper under the thick folds of her wide silk dress, and so concealed it.

"Come," said she, "come, Marguerite, is it in order to tell me all this nonsense that you came so early?"

"No, I came to see you in the first place, and to recall to mind our earlier habits, so sweet and gentle, you know, when we used to walk about at Vincennes and talk under an oak or in some grove, of those whom we loved and who loved us."

"You suggest a walk?"

"I have my carriage and three hours at my disposal."

"I am not dressed, Marguerite, — and — if you wish to talk without going to the woods of Vincennes, we could find in the garden some fine tree, shady groves, a bank covered with daisies, and all the violets which we smell from here."

"My dear marquise, I am sorry you refuse me. I needed to pour out my heart on yours."

"I repeat again, Marguerite, my heart is yours as much in this room, as much near here under the lime-tree in my garden as yonder under the oak in the wood."

"It is not the same for me. In drawing near to Vincennes, marquise, my heart approaches the object towards which for several days it has been aiming."

The marquise suddenly raised her head.

"You are surprised, are you not, that I still think of Saint-Mandé?"

"Saint-Mandé!" cried Madame de Bellière. And the glances of the two women met like two fiery swords in the first part of a combat.

"You, so proud!" said the marquise, with disdain.

"I, so proud!" replied Madame Vanel. "I am so made — I do not forgive neglect, nor can I endure infidelity. When I leave and any one cries, I am tempted still to love; but when one leaves me and laughs, I love madly."

Madame de Bellière gave an involuntary start.

"She is jealous," said Marguerite to herself.

"Then," continued the marquise, "you are madly in love — with the Duke of Buckingham — no, I am mistaken, with M. Fouquet?"

She felt the blow, and all her blood rushed to her heart.

"And you wished to go to Vincennes—even to Saint-Mandé?"

"I do not know what I wanted; you would have advised me, perhaps."

"On what?"

"You have often done so."

"Certainly it would not have been on this occasion; for I do not forgive as you do. I love less, perhaps; but when my heart has once been hurt, it is for always."

"But M. Fouquet has not wounded you," said Marguerite Vanel, with absolute simplicity.

"You understand perfectly what I mean. M. Fouquet has not wounded me. He is known to me neither by favor nor by injury, but you have cause to complain of him. You are my friend, and I should not advise you as you would wish."

"Ah! you prejudge."

"The sighs of which you spoke just now are more than indications."

"Oh, you overwhelm me," said the young woman suddenly, collecting all her strength like the wrestler making ready to

strike the final blow ; " you count only my evil passions and my weaknesses. As to my pure and generous sentiments, you do not speak of them. If at this moment I feel myself drawn towards the superintendent, if I take even one step towards him, which is probable, I admit, it is because M. Fouquet's fate touches me deeply ; it is because to my mind he is one of the unhappiest men in the world."

" Ah ! " said the marquise, placing one hand on her heart, " there is something new, then."

" You do not know ? "

" I know nothing," said Madame de Bellière, with that intense agony which suspends thought and speech, which suspends even life itself.

" My dear, in the first place, all the King's favor has been withdrawn from M. Fouquet and given to M. Colbert."

" Yes, so they say."

" It is very simple, since the discovery of the plot of Belle-Isle."

" I was assured that the discovery of the fortifications had turned out to the honor of M. Fouquet."

Marguerite began to laugh in so cruel a manner that Madame de Bellière could at that moment gladly have plunged a dagger in her heart.

" My dear," said Marguerite, " it is no longer a question of M. Fouquet's honor, but of his safety. In three days the ruin of the superintendent will be complete."

" Oh ! " said the marquise, smiling in her turn, " that is going a little too fast."

" I said three days, because I like to deceive myself with a hope. But the catastrophe will not occur later than twenty-four hours hence."

" Why so ? "

" For the simplest of reasons. M. Fouquet has no more money."

" In financial matters, my dear Marguerite, one is without money to-day who to-morrow can obtain millions."

" It might have happened that way in Fouquet's case, then, when he had two rich and clever friends who amassed money for him and made it out of everything ; but those friends are dead."

" Crowns do not die, Marguerite, they are hidden, sought for, bought, and found."

"You see things rose-colored; so much the better for you. It is too bad that you are not the Egeria of M. Fouquet, you might show him the source whence he could draw the millions for which the King asked him yesterday."

"Millions!" interposed the marquise in terror.

"Four — an even number."

"Infamous!" murmured Madame de Bellière, tortured by this cruel joy on the part of the other. "M. Fouquet has four millions surely, I think," she replied bravely.

"If he has those for which the King asks him to-day," said Marguerite, "he probably will not have those which the King will demand in a month."

"The King will ask him for more money?"

"No doubt; and that is why I told you that the ruin of this poor M. Fouquet is inevitable. From pride he will furnish the money, and when he has no more, he will fall."

"That is true," said the marquise, trembling, "the plan is bold. Tell me, does M. Colbert hate M. Fouquet very much?"

"I think he does not love him. But M. Colbert is a man of resource; he improves on acquaintance; he has tremendous ideas, great will-power, and tact; he will rise."

"Will he be superintendent?"

"It is probable. That is why, my good marquise, I was moved in favor of this poor man who once loved, even adored me. That is why, seeing him so wretched, I forgave his infidelity — for which I have reason to believe he repents. That is why I should not have been averse to offering him some consolation and good advice. He would have understood my step and would have been glad of it. It is sweet to be loved, you see; men greatly appreciate love when they are not blinded by power."

The marquise, overcome, broken down by these cruel attacks, calculated with the exactitude and precision of a cannon-shot, did not know how to reply; she could not even think.

The voice of her perfidious friend had assumed the most affectionate tone; she spoke like a woman, but hid the instincts of a panther.

"Well!" said Madame de Bellière, who hoped vaguely that Marguerite had ceased to overwhelm the vanquished enemy: "well! why do you not go and find M. Fouquet?"

"Really, marquise, you have made me reflect. No, it would be unbecoming for me to take the first step. M. Fouquet loves

me, no doubt, but he is too proud. I cannot expose myself to an affront. Besides, I have my husband to manage. You say nothing to me. Well, I shall consult M. Colbert on the subject."

She rose smilingly, as if to take leave. The marquise had not the strength to imitate her. Marguerite took a few steps in order to continue to enjoy the humiliating grief in which her rival was plunged; then suddenly:

"You will not go with me to the door?" said she.

The marquise rose, pale and cold, no longer troubling about the envelope which at the beginning of the conversation had greatly occupied her, and which her first step now brought to light. Then she opened the door of her oratory, and without turning her head towards Marguerite Vanel she disappeared within it. Marguerite said or rather stammered three or four words which Madame de Bellière did not even hear. But so soon as the marquise had disappeared, her envious foe, who could not resist the desire to make sure that her suspicions were well founded, crept along like a panther and picked up the envelope.

"Ah," said she, gnashing her teeth, "it was indeed a letter from M. Fouquet that she was reading when I arrived!"

And then she in turn darted from the room. Meantime, the marquise, having arrived behind the rampart of her door, realized that she had reached the end of her strength. For an instant she remained rigid, pale, and motionless; then like a statue which some heavy wind shakes from its pedestal, she tottered and fell lifeless to the carpet. The sound of her fall was heard as Marguerite's carriage rolled away from the hôtel.

CHAPTER VIII.

MADAME DE BELLIERE'S SILVERWARE.

THE blow had been much more painful because it had been unexpected. It took the marquise, therefore, some time to recover, but once herself again she began to reflect upon the events as they had been announced to her. She therefore returned, although she might have wrecked her life on the way, to that train of ideas which her implacable friend

had forced her to follow. Treason, then deep menaces veiled under a semblance of public interest — such were Colbert's manoeuvres. An odious delight in a coming fall, constant efforts to reach this end, seduction no less wicked than the crime itself — such was what Marguerite had used.

The broken atoms of Descartes triumphed; to the man without pity was united a woman without a heart.

The marquise saw with sorrow much more than with indignation that the King was mixed up in a plot which betrayed the duplicity of Louis XIII., already aging, and the avarice of Mazarin when he had not yet had time to gorge himself with French gold. But soon the spirit of this courageous woman resumed all its energy, and ceased to dwell on the discouraging speculations of compassion. The marquise was not one of those who weep when it is necessary to act, and who amuse themselves in bewailing a misfortune which they are able to relieve. For almost ten minutes she buried her face in her icy hands; then raising her head, with firm hand and with a gesture full of determination she rang for her women. Her mind was made up.

"Is everything ready for my departure?" she asked of one of her attendants who entered.

"Yes, madame, but we did not expect madame to leave Bellière for three days."

"Are all my jewels and articles of value packed?"

"Yes, madame; but we usually leave them in Paris. As a rule, madame does not take her jewels into the country."

"Everything is in order, you say?"

"In madame's closet."

"And the gold plate?"

"In the chests."

"And the silver plate?"

"In the great oak chest."

The marquise was silent, then in a calm voice she said:

"Have my goldsmith sent for."

The women withdrew to carry out the order. The marquise, however, had entered her own room and was looking at her jewel-boxes with the greatest care. Never had she given such close attention to those riches which are the pride of women; never had she looked at those jewels except to choose from them according to their setting or their color. To-day she admired the size of the rubies and the clearness of the diamonds;

she mourned over a klemish, a defect; she found the gold too light and the stones defective. The goldsmith found her thus engaged when he arrived.

"M. Faucheux," said she, "you supplied me with my gold service, I believe?"

"Yes, Madame la Marquise."

"I do not remember the amount of the bill."

"For the new service, madame, or for that which M. de Bellière gave you on your marriage? For I furnished both."

"Well, in the first place, for the new one?"

"Madame, the covers, the goblets, and the dishes with their covers, the epergne and the ice-bowls, the preserve-dishes, and the urns, cost madame sixty thousand livres."

"*Mon Dieu!* only that?"

"Madame thought my bill very large."

"True! true! I remember, in fact, that it was large; the workmanship, was it not?"

"Yes, madame, the engraving, the chasing; all new designs."

"For how much does the workmanship count in the price? Do not hesitate to tell me."

"A third of its value, madame, but —"

"We have then the other service, the old one, my husband's."

"Oh, madame, there is less work on that than on the one we have been talking about. It is worth only thirty thousand livres — intrinsic value."

"Seventy!" murmured the marquise. "But, M. Faucheux, there still remains my mother's service, you know; all that massive set, which on account of associations I did not wish to part with."

"Ah, madame, that would be a famous resource for those who, like your ladyship, might not be able to keep their plate. In those times, madame, they did not work as finely as they do to-day. They worked in solid metal. But that service is no longer used; however, it still has weight."

"That is all I want. How much does it weigh?"

"Fifty thousand livres at least. I do not refer to the enormous buffet vases, which alone weigh five thousand livres; or ten thousand for both."

"One hundred and thirty!" murmured the marquise. "You are sure of your figures, M. Faucheux?"

"Sure, madame. But it is not hard to weigh it."

"The amount is entered in my books."

"Oh, you are a systematic woman, Madame la Marquise."

"Let us now speak of something else," said Madame de Bellière, opening her caskets.

"I recognize these emeralds," said the merchant; "I was the one who mounted them. They are the most beautiful at court. No, I am wrong, the most beautiful are those of Madame de Châtellon. They came from M. de Guise; but yours, madame, are second."

"They are worth how much?"

"Mounted?"

"No, suppose I want to sell them?"

"I know very well who would buy them," said M. Fauchaux.

"That is just what I want to ask. They could be bought, then?"

"All your jewels could be bought, madame; it is known that you have the most beautiful ones in Paris. You are not a woman who changes. When you buy you buy the best; when you own them you keep them."

"What could I get for these emeralds?"

"One hundred and thirty thousand livres."

The marquise wrote on her tablets with a pencil the figures quoted by the jeweller.

"This ruby necklace?" said she.

"Of balas rubies?"

"Here they are."

"They are beautiful, superb. I did not know you had these stones, madame."

"Give me an estimate on them."

"Two hundred thousand livres. The centre one is worth a hundred thousand by itself."

"Yes, that is what I thought," said the marquise. "The diamonds! the diamonds! Oh, I have many of them: rings, chains, ear-rings, sprigs, aigrettes, clasps! Value them, M. Fauchaux, value them."

The jeweller took his magnifying glass, and his scales, weighed and inspected them, and made his calculations in a low tone:

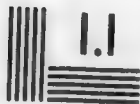
"These stones," said he, "cost your ladyship forty thousand livres' income."

"You value them at eight hundred thousand livres?"



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"Almost."

"That is what I thought. But the settings are separate."

"As usual, madame, and were I called on to sell or to buy I should be satisfied for profit with the gold alone of the settings. I should still make a good twenty-five thousand livres."

"A pretty sum!"

"Yes, madame, very pretty!"

Will you accept the profits, on condition of turning the jewels into money?"

"But, madame!" cried the jeweller, aghast, "you do not intend to sell your diamonds?"

"Silence, M. Fauchaux, do not trouble yourself about that; merely give me your answer. You are an honest man, furnisher of my house for thirty years. You knew my father and my mother, who were served by your father and mother. I speak to you as to a friend. Will you accept the gold of the settings in return for a ready sum to be put into my hands?"

"Eight hundred thousand livres! but that is enormous!"

"I know it."

"Impossible to find."

"Oh, no."

"But, madame, think of the effect made in public by the report of the sale of your jewels!"

"No one must know of it. You can have imitation jewels made for me exactly like the real ones. Do not answer. I wish it to be so. Sell them separately; sell only the stones."

"In that way it will be easy. Monsieur is looking for some jewels—for some single stones for Madame's toilet. There will be competition. I can easily dispose of them to Monsieur for six hundred thousand livres. I am sure that yours are the most beautiful."

"When can you do this?"

"Within three days."

"Well, the rest you can dispose of to private people. For the present, make me out a contract of sale, payment to be made within four days."

"Madame, madame, reflect, I pray you; you will lose one hundred thousand livres if you hurry."

"I will lose two hundred, if necessary. I want everything done this evening. Do you accept?"

"I accept, madame. I will not hide the fact, however, that I shall make five thousand pistoles by it."

"So much the better! How shall I have the money?"

"In gold, or in bills of the bank of Lyons, payable at M. Colbert's."

"I accept," said the marquise, eagerly; "return home and bring the sum in notes, quickly, do you understand?"

"Yes, madame, but —"

"Not a word, M. Fauchaux. By the way, the silver plate which I am forgetting. How much shall I have for that?"

"Fifty thousand livres, madame."

"That is a million," said the marquise in a low tone. "Monsieur, you will take away both the gold and the silver plate. I can pretend a remodelling of patterns more to my taste — melt it, I say, and bring me back its value in gold at once."

"Very well, your ladyship."

"You will place this gold in a chest; you will have one of your clerks accompany it without my servants seeing him. This clerk must wait for me in a carriage."

"In Madame de Fauchaux's?" asked the jeweller.

"If you wish; I will stop at your house for it."

"Yes, madame."

"Take three of my servants to carry the plate to your house."

"Yes, madame."

The marquise rang.

"The small wagon," said she, "at M. Fauchaux's disposal."

The jeweller bowed and withdrew, giving orders for the wagon to follow him closely and announcing that the marquise was to have her plate melted down, in order to have newer patterns. Three hours later she herself went to M. Fauchaux's and received from him eight hundred thousand livres in notes on the bank of Lyons, two hundred and fifty thousand livres in gold, locked in a chest which was with difficulty carried by a clerk to Madame de Fauchaux's carriage, — for Madame Fauchaux kept a carriage.

Daughter of a president of accounts, she had brought thirty thousand crowns to her husband, who was syndic of the goldsmiths. The thirty thousand crowns had increased in twenty years, until now the jeweller had become a millionaire, though a modest one. He had purchased an old carriage built in 1648, ten years after the birth of the King. This carriage, or rather this house on wheels, was the admiration of the entire

quarter; it was covered with allegorical paintings and clouds dotted with gold and silver stars.

It was this somewhat grotesque equipage which the noble lady entered, sitting opposite the clerk, who drew in his knees for fear of touching the marquise's dress.

This same clerk told the coachman, who was proud of driving a marquise :

"The Saint-Mandé road !"

CHAPTER IX.

THE DOWRY.

THE horses of M. Faucheux were honest Percherons, with thick knees and somewhat swollen legs. Like the carriage, they dated from the first half of the century. They did not travel, therefore, like the English horses of M. Fouquet, but took two hours to reach Saint-Mandé. One might have said that they travelled majestically, but majesty precludes haste.

The marquise stopped before a well-known door, although she had seen it but once, it may be remembered, under circumstances no less painful than those which brought her thither this time. She drew from her pocket a key, with her small white hand inserted it into the lock, pushed open the door, which yielded without noise, and ordered the clerk to carry the chest to the first floor. The weight of the chest, however, was such that the clerk was forced to seek aid from the coachman. The box was deposited in a small cabinet, ante-room, or boudoir adjoining the salon in which we once saw M. Fouquet at the feet of the marquise.

Madame de Bellière gave a louis to the coachman, a charming smile to the clerk, and dismissed them both. She closed the door behind them and stood waiting alone and barricaded. No servant appeared, but everything had been prepared as if some invisible genius had divined the needs and the wishes of the expected guest. The fire was laid, the candles were in the candelabra, refreshments on the buffet, books on the table, and fresh flowers in the Japanese vases. One would have said that the house was enchanted.

The marquise lighted the candles, inhaled the perfume of the flowers, seated herself and soon fell into deep thought. But her musing, although melancholy, was tinged with a certain sweetness. She saw a treasure spread out before her in the room, a million which she had wrested from her fortune as a harvester plucks a cornflower from her crown. She was dreaming the sweetest of dreams. She was thinking especially how she could leave all this money for M. Fouquet without his discovering the source of the gift. This idea was the first naturally to present itself to her mind. But although on reflection the matter seemed difficult to her she did not despair of success. She would ring to summon M. Fouquet and escape happier than if instead of having given a million she herself had found one. But since she had come, since she had seen this boudoir so coquettish in appearance that one would have said that a maid-servant had just removed from it the least particle of dust, since she had seen the salon in such excellent order that it might almost be said that she had just driven away the fairies that dwelt there, she asked herself if the glance of those whom she had displaced, whether genii, fairies, elves, or human creatures, had not recognized her. In that case Fouquet would know all; what he did not know he would guess; he would refuse to accept as a gift what perhaps he might have taken as a loan, in which case the enterprise would fail in its object as well as in the desired result.

It was necessary, therefore, in order to succeed, that serious steps should be taken. It was necessary that the superintendent should realize all the gravity of his position in order to yield to the caprice of a woman. In order to persuade him, all the charm of an eloquent friendship was necessary; and if this were not enough, all the influence of an ardent passion which in its absolute desire to convince would be turned aside by nothing.

Was not the superintendent indeed known for a man of delicacy and dignity? Would he allow himself to despoil a woman? No, he would struggle; but if any voice in the world could overcome his resistance it would be the voice of the woman he loved.

At this point another doubt and a cruel one passed through the mind of Madame de Bellière with the pain and sharp sting of a dagger-thrust. Did he love her? Would that light

mind, that fickle heart, pause for a moment even to gaze upon an angel?

Was it not with Fouquet, in spite of all his genius, in spite of his uprightness, as with those conquerors who weep on the battlefield when they have gained a victory?

"Well, it is on this point that I need enlightenment, it is on this point that I must decide," said the marquise. "Who knows if this heart so coveted is not an ordinary heart full of baser metal? Who knows if this mind when the touchstone is applied will not prove to be of a mean and trivial nature? Come! come!" she cried, "this is too much doubt, too much hesitation; the proof! the proof!"

She looked at the clock.

"It is seven o'clock. He must have come. It is the hour for signing his papers."

And rising with feverish impatience she walked towards the mirror, into which she smiled with the resolute smile of devotion; she touched the spring and drew out the handle of the bell. Then as if exhausted beforehand by the struggle in which she was about to engage, she threw herself on her knees, overcome, before a large armchair, burying her face in her trembling hands. Ten minutes later she heard the handle of the door turn. The door opened as if on invisible hinges. Fouquet appeared. He was pale, and bent under the weight of bitter thought. He did not hasten, he entered, that was all.

His preoccupation must have been very great to make this man of pleasure, for whom, indeed, pleasure was everything, respond so listlessly to such a summons.

In short, the night teeming with melancholy dreams had sharpened his features, usually so noble in their expression of indifference, and had traced dark circles beneath his eyes. He was still handsome, still noble, and the melancholy expression of his mouth, an expression so rare with him, gave to his features a new character which rejuvenated him.

Dressed in black, the lace ruffles over his chest much disordered by his restless hand, the superintendent stopped with dreamy eyes on the threshold of the room into which he had so often come to seek expected happiness.

This gloomy gentleness, this smiling sadness of expression which replaced his former excessive joy, produced an indescribable effect on Madame de Bellière, who gazed at him from afar.

A woman's eye can read all peril and suffering on the face of the man she loves. It might be said that on account of their weakness God has given to women more than to other creatures. They can hide their own feelings from man, but man cannot hide his from them.

The marquise divined at a glance all the unhappiness of the superintendent. She divined a night passed without sleep, a day spent in deception. From that moment she was strong; she felt that she loved Fouquet beyond everything else. Rising, she approached him and said:

"You wrote to me this morning that you were beginning to forget me, and that I, whom you had not seen, had no doubt ceased to think of you. I come to undeceive you, monsieur, and so much the more completely because I read one thing in your eyes."

"What is that, madame?" said Fouquet, surprised.

"That you have never loved me so much as at this moment; in the same way you must read from the step I am now taking that I have not forgotten you."

"Oh, marquise," said Fouquet, whose noble features were for a moment lighted by a flash of joy, "you are an angel, and men have no right to doubt you; they have only to humble themselves and to ask for forgiveness."

"In that case, forgiveness is granted you."

Fouquet endeavored to throw himself on his knees.

"No," said she, "sit here beside me. Ah! that is an evil thought which has just passed through your mind."

"How can you tell that, madame?"

"By the smile which has just spoiled your whole face. Come, of what are you thinking? Be frank and tell me. There should be no secrets between friends."

"Well, madame, tell me, then, why this harshness for the past three or four months?"

"Harshness?"

"Yes. Did you not forbid me to visit you?"

"Alas! my friend," said Madame de Bellière, with a deep sigh, "because your visits to me have caused you great trouble; because my house is watched; because the same eyes that had seen you might see you again; because I think it less dangerous for you that I should come here rather than that you should come to me; lastly, because I think you are unhappy enough already without my wishing to make you still more so."

Fouquet started. The words recalled all the cares of the office of superintendent to him who for several moments had thought of nothing save the hopes of the lover.

"I unhappy?" said he, trying to smile. "Really, marquise, you will make me think so by your own sadness. Are those beautiful eyes raised to me only to pity me? I was expecting another look from them."

"I am not the one who is sad, monsieur; look in the mirror — it is you."

"Marquise, I am somewhat pale, it is true, but it is from overwork. Yesterday the King asked me for some money."

"Yes, four millions. I know about it."

"You know about it?" cried Fouquet, surprised. "How can you know about it? It was only while playing cards after the queens had gone, and in the presence of one person, that the King —"

"You see that I know; that suffices, does it not? Well, go on, my friend; the King has demanded —"

"You understand, marquise, that it was necessary to procure it, then to have it counted and registered; all of which takes time. Since the death of M. de Mazarin there have been some fatigue and embarrassment in matters of finance. My administration is over-burdened; that is why I stayed awake last night."

"So that you have the amount?" asked the marquise, anxiously.

"It would be a delightful event, marquise," replied Fouquet, gayly, "if a superintendent of finances did not have a paltry four millions in his coffers."

"Yes, I believe you either have or will have them."

"What do you mean by I shall have them?"

"It is not very long since you were asked for two millions."

"It seems to me, on the contrary, that it was a century, marquise; but do not let us talk any more of money matters, if you please."

"On the contrary, let us talk of them, my friend."

"Oh!"

"Listen to me, for I have come only for that."

"What do you mean?" asked the superintendent, whose eyes expressed anxious curiosity.

"Monsieur, is the office of superintendent a permanent position?"

"Marquise!"

"You see that I answer you, and frankly too."

"Marquise, you surprise me; you speak to me as if we were partners!"

"It is very simple; I want to place some money with you, and naturally I am anxious to know if your position is assured."

"Really, marquise, I am perplexed, and do not see at what you are aiming."

"Seriously, my dear M. Fouquet, I have some funds which embarrass me. I am weary of buying real estate, and am anxious to have some friend turn them to account."

"But there is no haste about it, I suppose?" said Fouquet.

"On the contrary, there is great haste."

"Well, we will speak of it later."

"No, not later, for my money is there."

The marquise showed the offer to the superintendent, and opening it, pointed to the bundles of notes and the pile of gold.

Fouquet, who had risen at the same time as Madame de Bellière, stood for a moment thinking. Then suddenly, starting back, he sank into a chair, and hid his face in his hands.

"Oh, marquise! marquise!" he murmured.

"Well?"

"What opinion have you of me that you make me such an offer?"

"Of you?"

"Yes."

"But what do you yourself think about it? Come!" she replied.

"This money you bring me; you bring it because you know I am embarrassed. Oh, do not deny it, for I am sure of it. Do I not know your heart?"

"Well, if you know my heart, you must see that it is my heart I am offering you."

"I guessed it, then!" cried Fouquet. "Oh, madame, truly I never gave you the right to insult me in this way."

"Insult you!" said she, growing pale. "What strange delicacy! You have told me you love me. You asked me in the name of this love for my reputation, my honor; but when I offer you my money you refuse!"

"Marquise, you were free to keep what you call your repu-

tation and your honor. Leave me the liberty of preserving mine. Let me ruin myself, let me fall under the burden of the hatred which surrounds me, beneath the load of blunders I have committed, beneath the weight of my own remorse; but in heaven's name, marquise, do not completely crush me beneath this last blow."

"Just now you lacked spirit, M. Fouquet," said she.

"Possibly, madame."

"And now you lack feeling."

Fouquet pressed his clinched hand to his throbbing breast.

"Annihilate me, madame," said he; "I have nothing to reply."

"I offered you my friendship, M. Fouquet."

"Yes, madame; but you limited yourself to that."

"Is what I have done a mark of friendship?"

"Yes."

"And you refuse this proof of my friendship?"

"I refuse it."

"Look at me, M. Fouquet."

The eyes of the marquise shone.

"I offer you my love."

"Oh, madame," said Fouquet.

"I have loved you for a long time; women, like men, have false modesty. For long I have loved you, but I was unwilling to tell you of it."

"Oh!" said Fouquet, clasping his hands.

"Yes, it is true. You begged me for this love on your knees; I refused you; I was blind as you were just now. I offer you my love, now."

"Yes, your love, but only your love."

"My love, my self, my life, everything."

"Oh, my God!" cried Fouquet, dazed.

"Do you want my love?"

"Oh, but you crush me beneath the weight of my happiness!"

"Will you be happy? tell me, tell me; I am yours, wholly yours."

"It is supremest happiness!"

"Take me, then. But if for you I sacrifice a prejudice, sacrifice for me a scruple."

"Madame, madame, do not tempt me!"

"My friend, my friend, do not refuse me!"

"Ah, be careful of what you are proposing!"

"Fouquet, one word, 'No,' and I open this door."

She pointed to the one which led to the street.

"And you will not see me again. Another word, 'Yes,' and I will follow you where you will, with closed eyes, without defence, without refusal, without remorse."

"Élise! Élise! But this coffer!"

"It is my dowry."

"It is my ruin!" cried Fouquet, turning over the gold and the papers; "there is a million here."

"Yes, my jewels, which will be of no further use to me if you do not love me; which will be of no further use to me if you do love me as I love you!"

"Oh, it is too much! too much!" cried Fouquet; "I yield, I yield, even were it only to consecrate such devotion. I accept the dowry."

"And here is the woman!" said the marquise, throwing herself into his arms.

CHAPTER X.

GOD'S GROUND.

MEANWHILE Buckingham and De Wardes travelled like good companions in perfect harmony from Paris to Calais.

Buckingham had hastened to make his adieux, so that the greater part of them were made hurriedly. His visits to Monsieur and Madame, to the young Queen and the queen dowager had been made collectively — a precaution of the queen mother which saved him the grief of speaking again in private with Monsieur, and also the danger of again seeing Madame. Buckingham embraced De Guiche and Raoul. He assured the former of his entire regard; the latter of lasting friendship which would overcome every obstacle and be shaken neither by time nor distance.

The vans had already gone ahead; he himself left during the evening in a carriage with his entire suite.

De Wardes, angry at being, so to speak, led away abruptly by this Englishman, had racked his subtle brains for every means of escape from his fetters; but no one had given him

help, and he was forced to bear the burden of his bad temper and irritation. Those to whom he might have confided had, in their character of wits, rallied him on the superiority of the duke.

Others, more stupid, but more sensible, had mentioned to him the orders of the King which forbade duelling. Others again, and they were the greater number, who from Christian charity or national pride might have given him aid, did not care to run the risk of disgrace, and would at best have informed the ministers of a departure which might degenerate into a small massacre.

The result was that, everything being considered, De Wardes packed his portmanteau, took two horses, and, followed by a single servant, set out towards the barrier whither Buckingham's carriage had gone.

The duke received his adversary as he would have done his most intimate acquaintance, moved aside that he might be seated, offered him refreshments, and spread over him the sable cloak which had been thrown on the front seat. When they began to talk they spoke of the court without mentioning Madame; of Monsieur, without referring to his household; of the King, without alluding to his sister-in-law; of the queen mother without a word of her daughter-in-law; of the King of England without speaking of his sister; of the state of each of the travellers' hearts without pronouncing any name that might be dangerous. So the journey, which was made by short stages, was delightful; and Buckingham, really a Frenchman from wit and education, was enchanted at having chosen his partner so well.

Delicious meals of which they merely tasted; trials of horses in the beautiful meadows that lay along the road; rabbit hunts, for Buckingham had his greyhounds with him, — thus was the time spent. The duke somewhat resembled the beautiful river Seine which a thousand times folds France in its loving embraces, before deciding to reach the ocean. But on leaving France it was especially the new inhabitant of France he had brought to Paris whom Buckingham regretted. His every thought, and consequently his regret, was of her. So when at times, in spite of his command over himself, he was lost in thought, De Wardes left him alone.

This delicacy would surely have touched Buckingham, and changed his feelings towards De Wardes, if the latter, though

preserving silence, had borne a glance less malicious and a smile less false.

Instinctive dislikes are unchanging; nothing alters them; a few ashes sometimes cover them, but beneath the ashes they burn more furiously.

Having exhausted every distraction the route afforded, they arrived, as we have said, at Calais. It was towards the end of the sixth day.

On the previous evening the servants of the duke had gone on in advance and had chartered a boat. This boat was intended to join the little yacht which coasted along the edge of the water in sight, or bore broadside on, whenever it felt its white wings wearied, within two or three cannon-shots of the jetty.

This boat was to take on board all the duke's equipages.

The horses had been embarked; they had been hoisted from the boat upon the deck in baskets made expressly for that purpose, and wadded in such a way that their limbs, even in the most violent fits of terror or impatience, did not fail to have the soft support of the walls, and their coats were not even roughened. Eight of these baskets placed side by side filled the hold. It is known that in short voyages frightened horses do not eat, but shiver before the best of food which would be greatly desired by them on land.

By degrees the entire equipage of the duke was placed on board the yacht; his servants then informed him that everything was in readiness, and that they were waiting only for him to embark at his pleasure with the French gentleman. For no one would have supposed that the French gentleman could have anything to settle with the duke beyond an account of friendship.

Buckingham sent word to the captain of the yacht to hold himself in readiness, but said that as the sea was calm, and as the day promised a beautiful sunset, he did not intend to go on board before night, and would take advantage of the evening to walk on the shore. He added, furthermore, that finding himself in excellent company he had not the least desire to hasten his departure. As he said this, he pointed out to those about him the magnificent crimson sky along the horizon, the amphitheatre of fleecy clouds which ascended from the sun's disk to the zenith, assuming the form of a chain of mountains with summits heaped one upon the other. The

whole amphitheatre was tinged at its base with a kind of bloody foam fading away into opal and pearly tints as the eye glanced upwards to the summit. The sea was gilded with the same reflection, and upon the crest of every blue wave danced a point of light like a ruby exposed to the light of a lamp.

The mild evening, the sea-breezes, dear to dreamy minds, a wind from the east, heavy and blowing in delightful gusts; in the distance the yacht outlined in black, with its rigging brought out against the purple background of the sky, and here and there along the horizon sails bent against the azure like the wings of a plunging sea-gull, — the whole scene, indeed, well merited admiration. A crowd of curious ones followed the gilded attendants, amongst whom they mistook the steward and the secretary for the master and his friend.

As for Buckingham, dressed in a simple gray satin vest and a doublet of violet-colored velvet, his hat over his eyes, without orders or embroidery, he was noticed no more than De Wardes, dressed in black like an attorney.

The duke's attendants had received orders to have a bark ready at the head of the jetty and to watch the embarking of their master, without going to him unless he or his friend summoned them. "Whatever may happen," he had added dwelling on the words in a way they could not fail to understand.

After walking awhile on the shore :

"I think, monsieur," said Buckingham to De Wardes, "I think we must now make our adieux. The sea is rising, you perceive; in ten minutes it will have soaked the sands to such a degree that we shall be unable to keep our footing."

"My lord, I am at your orders, but —"

"But we are still on the King's soil, are we not?"

"Without a doubt."

"Well, come, there is yonder, as you see, a kind of island, surrounded by a great circular pool; the pool is increasing and the island is disappearing every minute. This island belongs to God, for it lies between two seas, and the King does not have it on his charts. Do you see it?"

"Yes, we cannot reach it even now without wetting our feet."

"True, but notice that it forms quite a high hill, and that the sea rises on each side, just sparing its summit. The result is that we are wonderfully placed on this little theatre. What do you think of it?"

"I shall be happy whenever my sword may have the honor of meeting yours, my lord."

"Well, come, then. It distresses me to have you wet your feet, M. de Wardes; but it is necessary, I think, that you should be able to say to the King: 'Sire, I did not fight on your Majesty's territory.' The distinction is perhaps somewhat subtle, but since Port-Royal you swim in subtleties. Oh, do not let us complain of this, for it gives you a chance to be delightfully witty, a characteristic which belongs only to you. If you are willing we will hasten, M. de Wardes, for the sea is rising and the night coming on."

"If I did not walk faster, my lord, it was in order not to go ahead of your grace. Are you on dry land, monsieur?"

"Yes, just at present. Look yonder. My foolish attendants are afraid we shall be drowned and have just made the boat into a cruiser. See how they dance on the point of the waves; it is curious, but that makes me seasick. Would you permit me to turn my back to it?"

"You will notice that in turning your back you will have the sun in your face, my lord."

"Oh, it is very feeble at this hour and will soon have disappeared. Do not trouble yourself about that."

"As you please, my lord. I spoke out of consideration for you."

"I know that, M. de Wardes, and I appreciate your remark. Shall we take off our doublets?"

"It is for you to decide, my lord."

"It is more comfortable."

"In that case I am quite ready."

"Tell me, M. de Wardes, without hesitation, if you feel uncomfortable on the wet sand, or if you still think yourself too close to French territory. We could fight in England or on my yacht."

"We shall do very well here, my lord, only I have the honor to call your attention to the fact that as the sea is rising we shall scarcely have time —"

Buckingham made a sign of assent, removed his doublet, and threw it on the sand. De Wardes did likewise. Both bodies, as white as two phantoms to those who were watching from the bank, were outlined against a violet-colored cloud which was descending from the sky.

"Faith, duke, we can scarcely begin," said De Wardes. "Do you feel how our feet are sinking in the sands?"

"I have sunk up to my ankles," said Buckingham, "without counting the fact that the water is still gaining on us."

"It has reached me already. As soon as you wish, duke."

De Wardes drew his sword; the duke did likewise.

"M. de Wardes," said Buckingham, "one final word, if you please. I am fighting you because I do not like you, because you have wounded my heart by ridiculing a certain passion I have, which I acknowledge at this moment, and for which I should be very glad to die. You are a wicked man, M. de Wardes, and I will do my best to kill you, for I feel that if you do not die from this blow you will in the future do much harm to my friends. That is all I have to say to you, M. de Wardes," and Buckingham saluted.

"And I, my lord, have this to say to you in reply: I have not hated you hitherto, but now that you have thus characterized me I do hate you, and I will do all I can to kill you." And De Wardes saluted Buckingham.

At the same moment their weapons crossed as two flashes of lightning meet in the night. The swords sought for each other; each divined where the other was and they met.

Both combatants were skilful swordsmen; the first passes were without any result.

Night had fallen rapidly. It was so dark that they were attacking and defending by instinct.

Suddenly De Wardes felt his steel arrested. He had touched Buckingham's shoulder. The duke's sword sank with his arm.

"Oh!" cried he.

"You are touched, are you not, my lord?" said De Wardes, drawing back two steps.

"Yes, monsieur, but only slightly."

"And yet you ceased to defend yourself."

"It was the first effect of the cold steel, but I have recovered. Let us begin again, if you please, monsieur."

And disengaging his sword with a sinister clashing of the blade, the duke wounded the marquis in the breast.

"You are hit also," said he.

"No," said De Wardes, standing firm.

"Pardon me, but seeing your shirt covered with blood —" said Buckingham.

"Well," said De Wardes, furious, "well, have at you!" And making a plunge he pierced Buckingham's arm. The



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sword passed between the two bones. Buckingham felt the member paralyzed, stretched out his left arm, seized the sword about to fall from his inert grasp, and before De Wardes could put himself on guard ran him through the breast. De Wardes swayed, his knees bent, and leaving his sword still fixed in the duke's arm, he fell into the water, which was reddened more than it had been from the reflection of the clouds.

De Wardes was not dead. He felt the frightful peril by which he was threatened. The sea was rising.

The duke, too, felt the danger. With an effort and a cry of pain he snatched the sword from his arm, then turning to De Wardes said:

"Are you dead, marquis?"

"No," replied De Wardes, in a voice choked by the blood which rose from his lungs to his throat, "but not far from it."

"Well, what is to be done? Come. Can you walk?"

Buckingham raised him on his knee.

"Impossible," said De Wardes, falling back. "Call your servants or I shall drown."

"Hello! hello!" cried Buckingham. "Boat ahoy! Quick! quick!"

The bark was rowed swiftly towards them.

But the sea made swifter progress.

Buckingham saw that De Wardes was again about to be covered by a wave. He passed his left arm, which was free and unwounded, around him and raised him.

The wave ascended to his waist, but did not move him. The duke began at once to walk toward the land.

But scarcely had he taken ten steps before a second wave, rising higher, more threatening and more furious than the first, struck him in the breast, knocked him over, and submerged him. Then it receded, leaving the duke and De Wardes lying on the sand.

De Wardes had fainted.

At this moment four of the duke's sailors, who understood the danger, sprang into the water and in a second were close to the duke. Their terror was great when they saw their master covered with blood, since the water with which it was impregnated flowed over his knees and feet. They attempted to carry him.

"No, no!" cried the duke. "To land! to land! The marquis!"

"Death to the Frenchman!" cried the Englishmen, sullenly.

"Miserable wretches!" cried the duke, raising himself with a gesture which sprinkled them with blood, "obey! M. de Wardes to shore! M. de Wardes safety before anything else, or I will have you hanged!"

Meanwhile the bark had approached. The secretary and the steward jumped into the sea and drew near to the marquis. He no longer showed any signs of life.

"I commit this man to you on your lives," said the duke. "To shore! M. de Wardes to shore!"

They raised him in their arms and carried him to the dry sand which the tide never reached.

Some idlers and five or six fishermen had gathered on the shore, drawn thither by the strange sight of two men fighting with the water up to their knees.

The fishermen, seeing a group of men approaching carrying a wounded man, entered the water up to their waists. The Englishmen handed the wounded man to them just as he was beginning to open his eyes. The salt water and the fine sand had gotten into his wounds, which were causing him intense suffering.

The duke's secretary drew from his pocket a heavy purse, and handed it to the one who seemed of most importance among them.

"From my master, the Duke of Buckingham, in order that every possible care may be taken of the Marquis de Wardes."

And followed by his men, he returned to the boat, which Buckingham had reached with great difficulty, but only after he had seen De Wardes out of danger.

The tide was already high; embroidered coats and silken belts were lost. Many hats had been carried away by the waves. As to the clothes of the duke and De Wardes, the tide had carried them to the shore.

They wrapped De Wardes in the duke's coat, believing that it was his own, and carried him in their arms towards the city.

CHAPTER XI.

THREEFOLD LOVE.

AFTER the departure of Buckingham, De Guiche imagined that the field belonged to him alone.

Monsieur, who had no longer the slightest feeling of jealousy, and who besides permitted himself to be monopolized by the Chevalier de Lorraine, allowed as much liberty in his house as the most exacting could desire.

The King, for his own part, who had taken a great liking to the society of Madame, planned amusement after amusement in order to brighten her stay in Paris, so that not a day passed without a ball at the Palais-Royal or a reception at Monsieur's.

The King had Fontainebleau made ready to receive the court, and every one was trying his best to be among the guests. Madame led the busiest life imaginable. Neither her voice nor her pen was idle for a moment. The conversations with De Guiche were little by little assuming an interest in which one could not fail to see the beginning of a deep attachment.

When eyes languish during a discussion as to the color of dress materials; when one spends an hour in analyzing the merits and the perfume of a sachet or of a flower, there are in the conversation words to which every one may listen, but gestures or sighs that every one may not see or hear.

When Madame had talked for some time with M. de Guiche she spoke with the King, who paid her a visit regularly every day. They played cards, wrote verses, or chose mottoes or emblems. This spring was not only the springtime of nature, it was the youth of an entire nation of which the court formed the head.

The King was handsome, young, and more gallant than any one else. He loved all women passionately, even the Queen his wife. He was, however, the most timid and the most reserved man in his kingdom; so much so that he had not admitted his sentiments to himself.

This timidity kept him within the limits of the simplest politeness and no woman could boast of being preferred to any other. One might foretell that the day when he should declare himself would be the dawn of a new sovereignty, but as yet

he had not done so. M. de Guiche took advantage of this to make himself the king of all the amorous court.

It had been said that he was on the best of terms with Mademoiselle de Montalais, that he was most attentive to Mademoiselle de Châtillon; now he was no longer even civil to any lady at court, he had eyes and ears for one only. So he unconsciously took up his position near Monsieur, who was fond of him and kept him as much as possible in his own house.

Naturally unsociable, he had kept away too much before the arrival of Madame, but after she had come he did not keep away enough.

That which had been noticed by every one was particularly remarked by the evil genius of the house, the Chevalier de Lorraine, for whom Monsieur showed a warm attachment because he had a cheerful disposition even in his malicious speeches and because he never lacked ideas with which to pass away the time.

The Chevalier de Lorraine, seeing that De Guiche threatened to supplant him, resorted to strong measures. He disappeared, leaving Monsieur greatly embarrassed.

The first day of his disappearance Monsieur scarcely asked about him, for De Guiche was there, and except for the conversations with Madame he rigorously devoted the hours of the day and night to the prince. But the second day Monsieur, finding no one at hand, asked where the chevalier was, and was told that no one knew.

De Guiche, having spent the morning in choosing embroideries and fringes with Madame, went to console the prince. But after dinner there were still some tulips and amethysts to be considered, and De Guiche returned to Madame's apartments.

Monsieur was alone. It was the hour for his toilet. He felt himself the most wretched of men and again asked if there were any news of the chevalier.

"No one knows where the chevalier is to be found," was the answer returned to the prince.

No longer knowing whither to carry his weariness, Monsieur went in his dressing-gown and cap to Madame's apartments.

There there was a large assembly of people laughing and whispering in every corner: here a group of women surrounding a man amid bursts of laughter; there Manicamp and Malicorne pillaged by Montalais, Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente, and two other laughing maids-of-honor.

Further on was Madame, seated on some cushions, and De Guiche on his knees beside her, spreading out a handful of pearls and precious stones amongst which the slender white finger of the princess was pointing out those which pleased her most.

In another corner sat a guitar-player singing some of the Spanish seguedillas which Madame had loved ever since she had heard them sung by the young Queen, with a certain minor cadence in her voice. But those which the Spanish woman had sung with tears in her eyes, the Englishwoman was humming with a smile which revealed her pearly teeth.

The room thus occupied presented the most smiling picture of pleasure.

On entering, Monsieur was struck by seeing so many people enjoying themselves without him. He was so jealous at the sight that he could not restrain himself from exclaiming like a child: "What! You are amusing yourselves here while I am bored to death all alone!"

His voice was like a clap of thunder which interrupts the warbling of birds among the leaves. There was an intense silence. De Guiche was on his feet in an instant. Malicorne crouched down behind the skirts of Montalais. Manicamp arose and assumed his grandiose air. The guitar-player shoved his instrument under a table and pulled the rug over it to hide it from the eyes of the prince.

Madame alone did not move, but smiling up at her husband said to him, "Is not this the hour for your toilet?"

"Which others choose for amusing themselves," grumbled the prince.

This unlucky speech was the signal for a general rout. The women scattered like a flock of frightened birds; the guitar-player vanished like a shadow; Malicorne, still protected by Montalais, who spread out her dress, glided behind a piece of tapestry. As for Manicamp, he went to the assistance of De Guiche, who naturally remained near Madame, and both with the princess bravely sustained the shock. The count was too happy to be angry with the husband, but Monsieur was vexed with his wife. He wanted a motive for a quarrel. He sought it, and the hurried departure of the crowd — so happy before his arrival and so disturbed by his presence — furnished him with a pretext.

"Why are they running away at the sight of me?" said he, in a surly tone.

Madame replied coldly that whenever the master appeared the household kept apart through respect.

As she said this she made so funny and so roguish a grimace that De Guiche and Manicamp could not restrain themselves. They burst into laughter; Madame followed suit. Monsieur himself caught the infection and was forced to sit down, since he laughed so that he could not preserve his balance.

Finally he stopped, but his anger had increased. He was even more furious at having laughed himself than he had been at seeing the others laugh. He looked at Manicamp with hard eyes, not daring to show his fury to the Comte de Guiche.

But at a sign which showed much anger Manicamp and De Guiche both withdrew, so that Madame, left alone, began sadly to gather up her pearls, smiled no more, and spoke still less.

"I am very glad," said the duke, "to see that I am treated like a stranger in your room, Madame;" and he left in a rage.

On the way he met Montalais, who was on guard in the antechamber.

"I am pleased to see you," said he, "but at the door."

Montalais made a deep courtesy.

"I do not quite understand," said she, "what your royal Highness does me the honor to say."

"I say, mademoiselle, that when you are all laughing together in Madame's apartments one is unwelcome who does not remain outside."

"Your royal Highness is not thinking or speaking so of yourself?"

"On the contrary, mademoiselle, it is of myself that I am speaking and thinking. Certainly I have no reason to flatter myself because of the reception which is accorded me here. What! on a day when there is in Madame's apartments -- in mine -- music and society, on a day when I count on amusing myself a little in my turn, every one rushes away! Are they afraid to see me, that every one flees at my approach? Are they doing something wrong, then, when I am absent?"

"Why, my lord," said Montalais, "nothing was done to-day which is not done every day."

"What! they laugh like that every day?"

"Why, yes, my lord."

"Every day there are groups like those I have just seen?"

"Just the same, my lord."

"And every day they thrum the guitar?"

"My lord, the guitar dates from to-day; but when we have no guitar we have violins and flutes. Women grow weary without music."

"The deuce! And the men?"

"What men, my lord?"

"M. de Guiche, M. de Manicamp, and the rest."

"All belong to my lord's household."

"Yes, yes; you are right, mademoiselle."

And the prince returned to his apartments in deep thought. He threw himself into his largest armchair without looking at himself in the glass.

"Where can the chevalier be?" said he.

There was one servant with the prince. His question was overheard.

"No one knows, my lord."

"Again that reply. The first one who answers me 'I do not know,' I shall discharge."

At these words every one fled from his apartments as they had done from Madame's.

The prince flew into the wildest rage. He kicked over a chiffonnier, which rolled on the floor broken into a thousand pieces.

Then, with the greatest coolness, he went to the galleries, and overturned one after another an enamelled vase, a porphyry ewer, and a bronze candelabrum. The whole made a frightful noise. Every one rushed to the doors.

"What does my lord wish?" the captain of the guard ventured to say timidly.

"I am making some music for myself," replied my lord, gnashing his teeth.

The captain of the guards sent for the physician of his royal Highness. But before the physician came Malicorne, who said to the prince:

"My lord, the Chevalier de Lorraine follows me."

The duke looked at Malicorne and smiled on him.

The chevalier then entered.

CHAPTER XII.

THE JEALOUSY OF M. DE LORRAINE.

THE Duc d'Orléans gave a cry of satisfaction on perceiving the Chevalier de Lorraine.

"Ah, this is fortunate," said he. "By what chance do we see you? Had you not disappeared, as every one said?"

"Yes, my lord."

"A caprice?"

"A caprice? I? Have caprices with your Highness? The respect—"

"Never mind about respect, in which you fail every day. I absolve you. Why did you leave?"

"Because I was quite useless to my lord."

"Explain yourself."

"My lord had about him people more amusing than I could ever be. I felt I had not the strength to contend, therefore I withdrew."

"All this reserve of yours shows lack of common sense. Who are some of the people against whom you cannot contend? De Guiche?"

"I give no names."

"How absurd! De Guiche annoys you?"

"I do not say that, my lord, but do not force me to speak. You well know that De Guiche is one of our best friends."

"Who is it, then?"

"I beg you, my lord, excuse me. Let us say no more about it."

The chevalier knew perfectly well that curiosity is excited by the refusal of an explanation just as thirst is stimulated by the removal of a beverage.

"No, I wish to know why you went away."

"Well, I will tell you, but do not take it in bad part."

"Speak."

"I perceived that I was in the way."

"In whose way?"

"In Madame's."

"How so?" said the duke, astonished.

"It is very simple. Madame is perhaps jealous of the friendship which you are kind enough to show me."

"Has she shown it to you?"

"My lord, Madame never speaks to me, especially since a certain time."

"What time?"

"Since the arrival of M. de Guiche whom, since he pleases her more than I, she receives at any hour."

The duke colored.

"At any hour? What do you mean by that, chevalier?" said he, severely.

"You see now, my lord, that I have displeased you. I was sure that I should."

"You do not displease me, but your statements are somewhat startling. In what respect does Madame prefer M. de Guiche to you?"

"I shall say nothing more," said the chevalier, bowing ceremoniously.

"On the contrary, I command you to speak. If you withdrew for that you must be very jealous."

"One must be jealous when one loves, my lord. Is not your Highness jealous of Madame? Would not your Highness, if you saw some one always with Madame, some one always treated with favor, take umbrage? One loves one's friends as one's lovers. Your royal Highness has sometimes done me the signal honor of calling me friend."

"Yes, yes! But there again is an equivocal phrase. Chevalier, you have an unfortunate way of putting things."

"What phrase do you mean, my lord?"

"You said, 'treated with favor.' What do you mean by 'with favor'?"

"Nothing is simpler, my lord," said the chevalier, with great good humor. "For instance, when a husband sees his wife summoning by preference such and such a man to her; when this man is always in her private apartments or at the door of her carriage; when there is always a place for the man close by her side; when other people find themselves outside of the conversation; when her bouquet is the same color as his ribbons; when music is going on in her apartments and little suppers in her room; when so soon as the husband appears silence ensues; when the husband suddenly finds that he has for companion the most attentive, the kindest of men, who a week before was as nothing to him — then —"

"Then? Finish."

"Then, I say, my lord, one is perhaps jealous. But all these details are scarcely to the point. There is no question of them in our conversation."

The duke was agitated and seemed to be struggling with himself.

"You do not tell me," he said, finally, "why you went away. Just now you said that it was from fear of being in the way. You even added that you had observed on the part of Madame a tendency to favor De Guiche."

"Ah, my lord, I did not say that."

"You did!"

"Well, if I did say so I saw nothing but what was innocent."

"But you did see something?"

"My lord confuses me."

"What difference does that make? Speak, if you are telling the truth, why should you feel confused?"

"I always speak the truth, my lord, but I always hesitate when it is a question of repeating the words of others."

"Ah, you are repeating. It seems that there has been some talk, then?"

"I confess that the subject has been mentioned to me."

"By whom?"

The chevalier assumed an almost angry air.

"My lord," said he, "you are submitting me to a cross-examination. You are treating me like a criminal at the bar — and the rumors which barely touch a gentleman's ear are quickly forgotten. Your Highness wishes me to magnify the report to the dignity of a fact."

"But," cried the duke in anger, "it is true that you withdrew because of this rumor."

"I will tell you the truth; I have been spoken to concerning M. de Guiche's attentions to Madame. Nothing more. An innocent pleasure, I repeat, and furthermore permissible. But, Monsieur, do not be unjust, and do not push the matter to extremes. It does not concern you."

"It does not concern me when it is a question of De Guiche's attentions to Madame?"

"No, my lord, no! And what I say to you I would say to De Guiche himself, so little importance do I attach to the court he is paying Madame. I would say it even to her. Only you understand what I fear. I am afraid of being thought jealous

of her favors when I am jealous of friendship only. I know your weakness. I know that when you love you are exclusive. Now you love Madame. And for that matter, who would not love her? Follow what I am saying: Madame has noticed among your friends the handsomest and the most attractive. She will influence us in such a way on his behalf that you will neglect the others. Indifference from you would kill me. It is already hard enough to endure Madame's. I have therefore made up my mind, my lord, to give place to the favorite whose happiness I envy, while professing for him a sincere friendship and admiration. Come, have you anything to say against this reasoning? Is it not that of an honorable man? Is my conduct not that of a true friend? Answer, at least, you who questioned me so roughly."

The duke had seated himself, his head buried in his hands. After a silence long enough for the chevalier to appreciate fully the effect of his oratory the duke arose.

"Come," said he, "be candid."

"As I am always."

"Good. You know that we have already noticed something in regard to that extravagant Buckingham."

"Oh, my lord, do not accuse Madame or I shall take leave of you. What! you resort to such measures? You suspect Madame?"

"No, no, chevalier, I do not suspect Madame, but I see, I compare —"

"Buckingham is a fool."

"A fool about whom you thoroughly opened my eyes."

"No, no," said the chevalier, quickly. "It was not I who opened your eyes, but De Guiche. Do not confuse us."

And he began to laugh with that sibilant laugh which resembles the hiss of a serpent.

"Yes, yes, you said a few words, but De Guiche was the more jealous."

"I should think so," continued the chevalier in the same tone. "He was fighting for home and altar."

"I beg your pardon," said the duke, haughtily, rebelling against this insidious jest.

"Is not M. de Guiche the first gentleman of your household?"

"Well," replied the duke, somewhat calmed, "did this passion of Buckingham's excite any comment?"

"Certainly."

"Is it said that M. de Guiche's is equally noticed?"

"My lord, you are mistaken again. It is not said that M. de Guiche is in love."

"Very good. Very good."

"You see, my lord, that it would have been better, a hundred times better, to have left me in my retirement than to have roused in you, by my scruples, suspicions that Madame will regard as crimes. And she will be right."

"What would you do?"

"Act reasonably."

"How?"

"I should not pay the least attention to the society of these new Epicureans, and in this way the rumors will cease."

"I shall see. I shall think about it."

"Oh, you have time. The danger is not great. And then it is a question neither of danger nor of passion. It was a question only of my fear of seeing your friendship for me lessen. From the moment you convinced me that I was mistaken I had no further thought."

The duke shook his head as though he meant to say, "You may have no other idea, but I have."

But the hour for dinner had come. My lord sent to inform Madame. The reply was brought to him that Madame could not be present. She would dine in her own apartments.

"That is not my fault," said the duke. "This morning, happening upon them in the midst of their music, I became jealous and they are out of sorts with me."

"We will dine alone," said the chevalier, with a sigh. "I am sorry De Guiche is not here."

"Oh, De Guiche will not be cross for long. He is a good-natured fellow."

"My lord," said the chevalier, suddenly, "a good idea has come to me. Just now in our conversation I may have irritated your Highness and given you cause for dissatisfaction against him. It is fitting that I should be the mediator. I will go and look for the count, and bring him back with me."

"Ah, chevalier, you have a good heart."

"You say that as though you are surprised."

"The deuce! You are not so considerate every day."

"That may be, but confess that I know how to atone for a wrong that I have committed?"

"I admit that."

"Will your Highness do me the favor to wait here a few moments?"

"Willingly. Go ahead. I will try on my Fontainebleau costume."

The chevalier left and called his attendants with great care as though he were giving them various orders.

All except his valet, whom he retained, went off in different directions.

"Find out," said he, "and at once, if M. de Guiche is not with Madame. How can it be learned?"

"Easily, monsieur. I will ask Malicorne, who will find out from Mademoiselle de Montalais. However, I must tell you that the inquiry will be useless, for all of M. de Guiche's attendants have gone away and he must have gone with them."

"Nevertheless, find out."

Scarcely ten minutes had elapsed before the valet returned. Mysteriously drawing his master towards the servants' staircase, he made him enter a little room, the window of which opened into the garden.

"What is it?" said the chevalier. "Why so many precautions?"

"Look, monsieur," said the valet.

"What?"

"Look yonder under the walnut tree."

"Ah, forsooth! I see Manicamp. What is he waiting for?"

"You will see if you have patience. There! Do you see now?"

"I see one, two, four musicians with their instruments, and behind them De Guiche himself. What is he doing there?"

"He is waiting until the small door of the staircase used by the maids of honor is opened; by that he will ascend to Madame's apartments, where some new music will be heard during dinner."

"This that you are telling me is beautiful."

"Is it not, monsieur?"

"And it is M. Malicorne that told you this?"

"Yes."

"He likes you, then?"

"He likes Monsieur."

"Why?"

"Because he wishes to belong to his household."

"By heaven, he shall! How much did he give you for that?"

"The secret which I sell to you, monsieur."

"I will pay you a hundred pistoles for it. Here, take them."

"Thank you, monsieur. See! the little door is opening. A woman admits the musicians —"

"It is Montalais."

"Hush, monsieur. Do not utter that name aloud. Whoever says Montalais says Malicorne. If you fall out with one you will be on bad terms with the other."

"Very well — I have seen nothing."

"And I have received nothing," said the valet, carrying away the purse.

Being sure that De Guiche had entered, the chevalier returned to Monsieur, whom he found splendidly attired, and beaming with joy and grace.

"They say," exclaimed Lorraine, "that the King takes the sun for his device. Really, Monseigneur, that emblem would suit you better."

"But De Guiche?"

"Cannot be found. He has fled, disappeared. Your ill-humor this morning frightened him away. He was not to be found in his rooms."

"Bah! the hare-brained fellow is capable of having set off post-haste for his estates. Poor fellow! We will recall him. Come, let us have dinner."

"My lord, it is a day for ideas. I have another."

"What is it?"

"My lord, Madame is angry with you, and she has reason to be. You owe her her revenge. Go and dine with her."

"Oh, that would be playing the part of a weak husband."

"No, of a good husband. The princess is tired — she will be crying over her dinner. Her eyes will be red. A husband who makes his wife's eyes red is odious. Come, my lord, come."

"No, my dinner is ordered here."

"You see, my lord, we shall be dull. My heart will ache with the knowledge that Madame is alone. You, hard-hearted as you would like to be, will be sighing. Take me to dine with Madame; it will be a charming surprise. I will wager that we shall be amused. You were wrong this morning."

"Perhaps so."

"There's no perhaps about it. It is a fact."

"Chevalier, chevalier, you counsel me ill."

"I counsel you well; you have every advantage, your suit embroidered in gold is marvellously becoming. Madame will be conquered even more by the man than by the deed. Come, my lord."

"You decide me. Let us go."

The duke left his apartment with the chevalier and went to Madame's.

The chevalier whispered these words into the ear of his valet: "Station some people before the little door, that no one may escape. Hurry."

And he entered Madame's antechamber behind the duke.

The ushers were about to announce them.

"Let no one stir," said the chevalier, laughing, "my lord wishes to give a surprise."

CHAPTER XIII.

MONSIEUR IS JEALOUS OF DE GUICHE.

MONSIEUR entered suddenly like those whose intentions are good and who expect to give pleasure, or like those who hope to surprise some secret, the terrible reward of the jealous.

Intoxicated by the first bars of the music, Madame was dancing like a madwoman, having left the dinner which she had already begun.

Her partner was M. de Guiche, who, with arms raised and eyes half closed, was bending on one knee like the Spanish dancers, with looks full of passion and with caressing gestures. The princess was dancing about him with the same smile and the same alluring seductiveness.

Montalais was admiring. La Vallière, seated in a corner, was looking on thoughtfully. It is impossible to describe the effect which the entrance of Monsieur produced upon this happy company. It would also be wholly impossible to describe the effect which was produced by this happy company on Philippe.

The Comte de Guiche had not strength to rise. Madame stopped in the midst of her dance, unable to utter a word.

The Chevalier de Lorraine, leaning against the door-post, was smiling like a man lost in the most innocent admiration.

The pallor of the prince, the convulsive trembling of his hands and limbs, were the first symptoms which struck those present. A profound silence succeeded the music of the dance.

The Chevalier de Lorraine took advantage of this interval to salute Madame and De Guiche most respectfully, pretending to confuse them in his salutation like the two heads of the house.

Monsieur approached in his turn.

"I am enchanted," said he in a harsh voice. "I came here expecting to find you ill and low-spirited. I find you giving yourself up to new pleasures. Really, it is most fortunate. My house is the most delightful in the world."

Then turning to De Guiche; "Count," said he, "I did not know that you were so good a dancer."

And turning to his wife: "Be kinder to me," said he, with a bitterness that veiled his anger. "Every time that you have friends with you invite me. I am a much neglected prince."

De Guiche had recovered his self-possession, and with a natural pride that well became him, he said: "My lord well knows that my entire life is at his service. Whenever there is a question of giving it I am ready. To-day it is a question only of dancing to the sound of violins, and I dance."

"And you are right," said the prince, coldly. "But, Madame," he continued, "you do not notice that your ladies deprive me of my friends. M. de Guiche does not belong to you, Madame, but to me. If you wish to dine without me you have your ladies. When I dine alone I have my gentlemen - do not rob me of everything."

Madame felt the reproach and the lesson. The color mounted swiftly to her face.

"Monsieur," she replied, "on coming to the court of France, I did not know that princesses of my rank were to be regarded as the women of Turkey. I did not know it was forbidden for us to see men; but since such is your wish, I will conform to it; do not hesitate, if you wish it, to bar my windows."

This reply, which made Montalais and De Guiche smile, renewed the prince's anger, of which a good part had already evaporated in words.

"Very well!" said he, in a concentrated tone, "this is how I am respected in my own house!"

"My lord, my lord!" murmured the chevalier in Monsieur's ear, in such a way that every one clearly noticed he was trying to calm him.

"Come," replied the prince for all answer, drawing him away, and turning around so suddenly that he came near running against Madame.

The chevalier followed his master to his own apartment, in which the prince had no sooner seated himself than he gave free rein to his fury.

The chevalier raised his eyes to heaven, clasped his hands, and said nothing.

"Your opinion?" cried Monsieur.

"On what, my lord?"

"On all that is going on here."

"Oh, my lord, it is serious."

"It is abominable! I cannot live this way."

"How wretched it is!" said the chevalier. "We hoped to have peace after the departure of that madman Buckingham."

"And this is worse!"

"I do not say that, Monsieur."

"No, but I say it; for Buckingham would never have dared to do the fourth part of what we have seen."

"What do you mean?"

"Hide himself in order to dance, and feign indisposition in order to dine tête-à-tête."

"No, no, my lord!"

"Yes!" cried the prince, exciting himself like a self-willed child; "but I will endure it no longer; what goes on must be known."

"My lord, a whisper —"

"By heaven! Shall I inconvenience myself when one takes so little trouble about me? Wait for me here, chevalier, wait for me here!"

The prince disappeared in the next room, and asked the usher if the queen mother had returned from chapel.

Anne of Austria was happy: peace restored to her family, a nation delighted with the presence of a young monarch, well fitted for great things, the revenues of the state increased; external peace assured; everything promised a quiet future.

She sometimes remembered the poor young man whom she had received as a mother and turned away as a stepmother. A sigh concluded the thought.

Suddenly the Duc d'Orléans entered her room.

"Mother," he cried, hastily closing the doors, "things cannot go on this way."

Anne of Austria raised her beautiful eyes to him, and with quiet sweetness said:

"Of what things are you speaking?"

"I allude to Madame."

"Your wife?"

"Yes, mother."

"I'll wager that that mad Buckingham has written some farewell letter to her."

"Oh, yes, mother. it must be a question of Buckingham!"

"Of whom else, then? for that poor fellow was wrongly the object of your jealousy, and I thought —"

"Mother, Madame has already replaced M. de Buckingham."

"Philippe, what do you mean? You speak heedlessly."

"No, no. Madame has managed so cleverly that I am still jealous."

"Of whom in God's name?"

"What! you have not noticed?"

"No."

"You have not seen that M. de Guiche is always in her rooms with her?"

The queen clapped her hands together and began to laugh.

"Philippe," said she, "you have not merely a fault, but a disease."

"Whether a fault or a disease, Madame, I suffer from it."

"And you pretend that an evil which exists only in your imagination can be cured? You wish me to approve of your jealousy when it is without foundation?"

"So you are beginning to say for this one what you said for the other?"

"Because, my son," said the queen, dryly, "what you did for the other you are going to do again for this one."

The prince bowed, somewhat piqued.

"And if I give you facts," said he, "will you believe me?"

"My son, in regard to anything but jealousy I would believe you without any statement of facts; but for jealousy I can promise you nothing."

"Then it is just as if your Majesty ordered me to keep still and dismissed me without a hearing."

"Not at all; you are my son, and I owe you all the indulgence of a mother."

"Oh, say what you think; you owe me all the indulgence a madman deserves."

"Do not exaggerate, Philippe, and be careful not to represent your wife as a depraved character —"

"But the facts!"

"I am listening."

"This morning, at ten o'clock, there was music in Madame's apartments."

"That was innocent."

"M. de Guiche was talking with her alone. Ah! I forgot to tell you that for the last week he has left her no more than her shadow."

"My friend, if they were doing wrong they would hide."

"Good!" exclaimed the duke, "I expected that from you. Remember what you have just said. This morning, I say, I surprised them, and clearly showed my disapproval."

"You may be sure that that will suffice; it was perhaps even a little too severe. These young women are sensitive; to reproach them for a wrong they have not committed is sometimes equal to telling them that they might do it."

"Very good, but wait. Remember also what you have just said, Madame. This morning's lesson ought to have sufficed, and 'if they were doing wrong they would hide.'"

"That is what I said."

"Well, just now, repenting of my harshness of the morning, and thinking that De Guiche was sulking at home, I went to Madame's room. Guess what I found there? More music, dancing, and De Guiche; he was hidden there."

Anne of Austria frowned.

"It was imprudent," said she. "What did Madame say?"

"Nothing."

"De Guiche?"

"The same — or — he muttered something impertinent."

"What do you conclude, Philippe?"

"That I have been made a fool of; that Buckingham was only a pretext, and that the real culprit is De Guiche."

Anne shrugged her shoulders.

"Well?"

"I wish De Guiche to leave my house as Buckingham did and I shall ask it of the King unless —"

"Unless?"

"You yourself will execute the commission, Madame: you, who are so clever and so kind."

"I will not do it."

"What, mother?"

"Listen, Philippe; I am not disposed to pay people poor compliments every day; I have some influence over this young woman, but I cannot take advantage of it without losing it; besides, there is nothing to prove that M. de Guiche is guilty."

"He has displeased me."

"That concerns you."

"Well, I know what I shall do," said the prince, impetuously. Anne looked at him anxiously.

"What will you do?"

"I will have him drowned in my pond the first time I find him in my house again."

And this ferocious speech launched, the prince awaited some show of terror. The queen was unmoved.

"Do so," said she.

Philippe was as weak as a woman, and began to exclaim: "I am betrayed; no one loves me, — even my mother joins my enemies!"

"Your mother sees further than you do, and does not care to advise you, since you will not listen."

"I shall go to the King."

"I was about to propose that. I am expecting his Majesty here; it is time for his visit. Explain the matter to him."

She had scarcely finished when Philippe heard the door of the ante-room thrown open noisily. Fear seized him. The King's footsteps were heard on the carpet. The duke fled through a small door, leaving the queen by herself. Anne of Austria began to laugh, and was still laughing when the King entered.

He came very affectionately to inquire news of the queen mother's health, which was already failing. He came also to announce to her that all the preparations for the journey to Fontainebleau were complete.

Seeing her laughing, he felt his anxiety regarding her grow less, and laughed himself as he spoke to her.

Anne of Austria took his hand, and in a voice full of playfulness, said:

"Do you know that I am proud of being a Spanish woman?"

"Why, Madame?"

"Because Spanish women are at least worth more than English women."

"Explain yourself."

"Since your marriage you have not had a single reproach to make against the Queen."

"No, indeed."

"Yet you have been married some time. Your brother, on the contrary, has been married fifteen days —"

"Well?"

"And is complaining of Madame for the second time."

"What! Buckingham again?"

"No, another."

"Who?"

"De Guiche."

"Ah! So Madame is a coquette?"

"I fear so."

"My poor brother!" said the King, laughing.

"You forgive coquetry, I see?"

"In Madame, yes; Madame is not a coquette at heart."

"That may be; but your brother has lost his head about it."

"What does he want?"

"De Guiche must be drowned, he says —"

"That is severe."

"Do not laugh; he is exasperated. Suggest something."

"To save De Guiche — willingly."

"Oh, if your brother heard you, he would conspire against you, Monsieur, as your uncle did against the King your father."

"No. Philippe is too fond of me, and I of him. We shall live as good friends. What is the substance of his request?"

"That you will prevent Madame from being a coquette and De Guiche from being amiable."

"Only that? My brother has a high idea of royal power — to correct a woman! Hard to do that, even to a man!"

"How would you go to work?"

"With a word to De Guiche, who is a clever fellow, I can persuade him."

"But Madame?"

"That will be more difficult. A word will not be enough. I will compose a homily and will read it to her."

"Time presses."

"Oh, I will use all possible speed. We have a repetition of the ballet this afternoon."

"You will preach while dancing?"

"Yes, Madame."

"You promise to convert her?"

"I will eradicate the heresy, either by conviction or by fire."

"Very well! Do not mix me up in the affair; Madame would not forgive me all her life; and as a mother-in-law I ought to live with my daughter-in-law."

"Madame, the King will take everything into his own hands. But let me reflect."

"On what?"

"It might be better, perhaps, if I were to go and see Madame in her own apartment?"

"That would be somewhat serious."

"Yes, but seriousness is not amiss in preachers, and then the music of the ballet will drown half my arguments. Besides, it is a question of preventing any violence on the part of my brother. A little haste might be better. Is Madame in her rooms?"

"I think so."

"The statement of grievances, if you please?"

"I will give it in two words: constant music; attentions of De Guiche; suspicions of conspiracies and plots."

"The proofs?"

"None."

"Good; I will go to Madame."

And the King turned to glance in the mirrors at his costume, which was rich, and his face, which glowed like diamonds.

"Does she keep Monsieur at a distance?" he asked.

"Oh, fire and water are not more opposed."

"That is enough. Mother, I kiss your hands — the most beautiful hands in France."

"Success to you, Sire; be the family peacemaker."

"I shall employ no ambassador," said Louis. "This is saying to you that I shall succeed."

He left the room laughing, and carefully adjusted his ruffles as he went along.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE MEDIATOR.

WHEN the King appeared at Madame's all the courtiers, whom the news of a conjugal scene had dispersed through the apartments, began to feel the most serious anxiety. A storm was evidently rising in that direction, all the elements of which the Chevalier de Lorraine, in the midst of the groups, was analyzing with delight, adding suggestions to the weaker and influencing in his wicked designs the stronger, in order to produce the most evil effects possible.

As Anne of Austria had said, the presence of the King gave a solemn character to the affair. In 1662 the discontent of Monsieur with Madame and the intervention of the King in Monsieur's private affairs was no small matter.

So the boldest, who had surrounded the Comte de Guiche from the first, were seen to move away from him in a sort of fear; and the count himself, infected by the general panic, withdrew to his own room.

The King entered Madame's apartment, saluting every one, as he was in the habit of doing. The maids of honor were ranged in a line along his passage in the gallery.

Preoccupied as was his Majesty, he gave the glance of a master at the two rows of young and lovely women, who modestly lowered their heads. All blushed to find the eyes of the King on them. One only, whose long hair fell in silken curls over the most beautiful skin in the world, was pale and could scarcely sustain herself, in spite of the knocks her companion gave her with her elbow. This was La Vallière, whom Montalais thus supported, imparting to her in whispers some of the courage with which she herself was so abundantly provided.

The King could not resist turning round again. All the heads, which had already been raised, were again lowered; but the only blonde one among them remained motionless, as though she had exhausted all the strength and intelligence which were left her.

On entering Madame's room, Louis found his sister-in-law reclining on the cushions of her cabinet. She rose and made

a profound courtesy, murmuring some thanks for the honor she was receiving. Then she resumed her seat, overcome by a weakness, assumed, no doubt, for a lovely color flushed her cheeks, and her eyes, still red from recent weeping, never had flashed more fire.

When the King was seated, and when he had remarked, with that keenness of observation which characterized him, the disorder of the room and the no less great disorder of Madame's face, he assumed a playful manner.

"Sister," said he, "at what hour to-day should you like to have the ballet?"

Madame slowly and languidly shook her charming head and said: "Ah, Sire, kindly excuse me from the rehearsal. I was going to inform your Majesty that I could not go to-day."

"Why," said the King in careful surprise, "are you ill, sister?"

"Yes, Sire."

"In that case I shall summon your doctors."

"No, for the doctors can do nothing for me."

"You frighten me."

"Sire, I want to beg permission of your grace to return to England."

The King started.

"To England! Do you mean what you say, Madame?"

"I say it reluctantly, Sire," replied the granddaughter of Henri IV., resolutely, her beautiful black eyes gleaming. "Yes, I regret to have to make such confidences to your Majesty; but I am too unhappy at your Majesty's court. I want to return to my own family."

"Madame! Madame!"

And the King drew near.

"Listen to me, Sire," continued the young woman, acquiring by degrees that ascendancy over her interrogator which was given by her beauty and her nervous nature. "I am accustomed to suffering; young as I am, I have yet been humiliated and scorned. Oh, do not contradict me, Sire," said she, with a smile.

The King colored.

"So I have begun to believe that God brought me into the world for nothing save scorn — me, the daughter of a powerful king; but since He deprived my father of life He could

well smite my pride. I have suffered greatly. I have caused my mother much grief; but I swore that if ever God gave me a position of independence, were it that of a workwoman of the people, who gains her bread by manual labor, I would never suffer the least humiliation. That day has come. I have recovered the fortune due to my rank, to my birth. I have ascended the steps of the throne. I thought that, allied to a French prince, I would find in him a kinsman, a friend, an equal; but I see that I have found only a master, and I rebel against it, Sire. My mother shall know nothing of it. You, whom I respect and whom — I love — ”

The King started; never had voice so caressed his ear.

“ You, Sire, who know all, since you have come here, — you will perhaps understand me. If you had not come I should have gone to you. It is your permission to go away that I want. I leave it to your delicacy. You, a man of feeling, to exculpate and protect me.”

“ Sister, sister,” stammered the King, overcome by this bold attack, “ have you carefully reflected on the enormous difficulty of the project you have formed ? ”

“ Sire, I do not reflect, I feel. Attacked, I instinctively repel the attack; that is all.”

“ But what have they done to you ? Come.”

The princess, as will be seen by this manœuvre, peculiar to women, had escaped every reproach and had formulated a much more serious one: from the accused she had become the accuser. It is an infallible sign of guilt, but notwithstanding this even the least clever women always know how to turn the tables to win.

The King did not realize that he had come to her to say: “ What have you done to my brother ? ” and that he had been reduced to asking: “ What have they done to you ? ”

“ What have they done to me ? ” replied Madame. “ Oh, one must be a woman to understand. Sire, they have made me cry.”

And with a finger, which for slenderness and whiteness had not its equal, she pointed to her brilliant eyes bathed in tears, and again began to weep.

“ Sister I beg of you,” said the King, advancing to take her warm, throbbing hand, which she let him hold.

“ Sire, in the first place I was deprived of the presence of a friend of my brother. The Duke of Buckingham was an

agreeable, pleasant guest for me, a countryman who knew my habits, almost a companion, I might say, so many were the days we used to pass together with our other friends on the beautiful water of St. James."

"But, sister, Villiers was in love with you."

"A pretext! What does that matter," said she seriously, "whether the duke was in love with me or not? Is a man in love dangerous for me? Ah, Sire, it is not sufficient for a man to love one."

And she smiled so tenderly, so archly, that the King felt his heart beat and throb in his breast.

"Nevertheless, suppose my brother were jealous?" he interrupted.

"Well, I admit that is a reason, and they sent away the duke."

"Sent away? Oh, no!"

"Expelled, dismissed, drove away, if you prefer, Sire. One of the first gentlemen of Europe saw himself forced to leave the court of the King of France, of Louis XIV., like a beggar, because of a glance or of a bouquet. That was little worthy of the most gallant court. Pardon me, Sire, I forgot that in speaking thus I was attacking your sovereign power."

"Faith, no, sister, it was not I who dismissed the duke. He pleased me greatly."

"It was not you?" said Madame, cleverly. "Ah, so much the better!" And she emphasized the "so much the better" as if she had said, "so much the worse."

There was silence for several minutes. Then she resumed:

"The Duke of Buckingham gone, — I now know why and by whose means, — I thought I should have recovered my tranquillity. Not at all. Behold, Monsieur found another pretext; behold —"

"Behold," said the King, playfully, "another presents himself. And that was natural; you are beautiful, Madame; you will always be admired."

"In that case," said the princess, "I shall make solitude around me. That, indeed, is what is desired; what in fact is being prepared for me. But no, I prefer to return to London. There I am known and appreciated. I shall have my friends without fearing that they will be called my lovers. Shame! It is an unworthy suspicion, and on the part of a gentleman,

too! Oh, Monsieur has lost everything in my estimation since he has shown himself to me as the tyrant of a woman."

"No, no, my brother is guilty only of loving you."

"Of loving me? Monsieur love me? Ah, Sire!"

And she burst out laughing.

"Monsieur will never love a woman," said she; "Monsieur loves himself too much. No, unfortunately for me, Monsieur's is the worst kind of jealousy; jealousy without love."

"Admit, however," said the King, who was beginning to grow interested in this changeable and exciting conversation, "admit, however, that De Guiche loves you."

"Ah, Sire, I know nothing whatever about that."

"You must see it. A man who loves betrays himself."

"M. de Guiche has not betrayed himself."

"Sister, sister, you are defending M. de Guiche!"

"The idea! I? Oh, Sire, there was lacking to my trouble only a suspicion from you."

"No, Madame," said the King, hastily. "Do not worry. Oh, you are crying! calm yourself, I implore."

And yet she wept; great tears rolled down her cheeks upon her hands. The King took one of her hands and kissed away the tears. She looked at him so sadly and so sweetly that he was cut to the heart.

"You care nothing for De Guiche?" said he, more anxiously than was suited to his rôle of mediator.

"No, nothing, nothing."

"Then I can reassure my brother?"

"Oh, Sire, nothing will reassure him."

"Do not believe that he is jealous. Monsieur has received bad advice, and he is of a restless temperament."

"He may well be so where you are concerned."

Madame's eyes fell and she was silent. The King did likewise. He still held her hand.

The silence of a moment seemed that of a century.

Madame gently withdrew her hand. After this she was sure of her triumph. The battlefield was hers.

"Monsieur complained," said the King, timidly, "that you prefer the society of certain individuals to him and his conversation."

"Sire, Monsieur spends his life looking at himself in a mirror and plotting with the Chevalier de Lorraine against women."

"Oh, you are going a little too far."

"I say what is true. Look for yourself, Sire, and you will see that I am right."

"I will do so, but in the meantime what satisfaction can I give my brother?"

"My departure."

"You repeat that word?" cried the King, imprudently, as if during the past ten minutes such a change had been produced on Madame that all her ideas were altered.

"Sire, I can no longer be happy here," said she. "M. de Guiche annoys Monsieur. Will they send him away too?"

"If necessary, why not," replied Louis XIV., smiling.

"Well, after M. de Guiche — whom for that matter I warn you I should regret."

"Ah! You would regret him?"

"Of course; he is amiable, he professes friendship for me, and he amuses me."

"Ah, if Monsieur were to hear you!" said the King, piqued. "Do you know that I will not undertake to reconcile you? I shall not even attempt it."

"Sire, at this late date can you prevent Monsieur from being jealous of the first comer? I know very well that M. de Guiche is not the first."

"Again! I warn you that as a good brother I shall hate M. de Guiche."

"Ah, Sire," said Madame, "do not, I beg, assume either Monsieur's hatred or his sympathies. Remain King. That will be better for you and for every one else."

"You are an adorable jester and I understand that even those at whom you mock adore you."

"And that, Sire, is why you, whom I might have had for a defender, are going to join the ranks of those who persecute me," said Madame.

"I your persecutor? Heaven forbid!"

"Then," she continued languidly, "grant what I ask."

"What is that?"

"To return to England."

"That! Oh, never, never!" cried Louis XIV.

"I am a prisoner, then."

"In France, yes."

"What must I do?"

"Sister, I shall tell you."

"I shall listen to your Majesty like a humble servant."

"Instead of indulging in somewhat reckless intimacies, instead of alarming us by isolating yourself, let us see you always; do not leave us, live among us. Certainly M. de Guiche is amiable; but although we have not his wit—"

"Oh, Sire, you well know that you are too modest!"

"No, I swear. One may be King, yet feel himself that he has less chance of pleasing than such and such a gentleman."

"I am positive, Sire, that you do not believe a single word of what you are saying."

The King looked at Madame tenderly.

"Will you promise me something?" said he.

"What?"

"Not to waste the time which you owe to us in your room with strangers. Would you like to form with me an alliance, defensive and offensive, against the common enemy?"

"An alliance with you, Sire?"

"Why not? Are you not a power?"

"But you, Sire, are you a faithful ally? From what day shall this alliance date?"

"From to-day."

"And I am to draw up the treaty?"

"Very good!"

"And you will sign it?"

"Blindly."

"Oh, in that case, Sire, I can promise you wonders; you are the star of the court when you appear."

"Well?"

"Everything shines."

"Oh, Madame, Madame!" said Louis XIV., "you well know that all light comes from you, and that if I take the sun for a motto it is only an emblem."

"Sire, you flatter your ally. So you wish to deceive her?" said Madame, shaking her rebellious finger at the King.

"What! you think I deceive you when I am assuring you of my affection?"

"Yes."

"What has made you doubt?"

"One thing."

"Only one?"

"Yes."

"What one? I should be very wretched if I could not conquer one thing."

"This is not in your power, Sire; it is not even in God's power."

"What is it?"

"The past."

"Madame, I do not understand," said the King, just because he had understood too well.

The princess took his hand.

"Sire," said she, "I had the misfortune to displease you so long ago that I have almost the right to ask myself to-day how you could have accepted me as a sister-in-law."

"Displease me! you!"

"Come, do not deny it."

"But I must."

"No, no; I will recall it to you."

"Our alliance dates from to-day," cried the King, with a warmth that was not feigned; "you shall not recall the past any more; nor shall I; but I shall remember the present. I have it before me; here it is; look!"

And he led the princess to a mirror, in which she saw herself blushing and beautiful enough to captivate a saint.

"It is all the same," she murmured; "it will not be a very worthy alliance."

"Must I swear?" asked the King, carried away by the turn the conversation had taken.

"Oh, I never refuse a good oath," said Madame; "it is always a semblance of security."

The King knelt on a footstool and took Madame's hand.

She, with a smile which a painter could not have rendered and a poet could not imagine, gave him both her hands, in which he hid his burning face.

Neither could utter a syllable.

The King felt Madame withdraw her hands, caressing his face. He arose at once and left the apartment.

The courtiers noticed his color and concluded that the scene had been a stormy one. But the Chevalier de Lorraine hastened to say:

"Oh, no, gentlemen, reassure yourselves. When his Majesty is angry, he is pale."

CHAPTER XV.

THE ADVISERS.

THE King left Madame in a state of agitation which he himself would have been at a loss to account for. It is impossible, in fact, to explain the secret play of those strange sympathies which suddenly and without apparent cause are aroused after many years passed in the greatest calmness and indifference by two hearts destined to love each other.

Why had Louis formerly scorned, almost hated, Madame? Why did he now find this woman so beautiful, so desirable? and why not only did he think of her, but why did he think of her so constantly? Why, in short, had Madame, whose eyes and mind were sought for in another direction, shown for the King during the last week a semblance of favor which implied a more perfect intimacy.

It must not be supposed that Louis proposed to himself a plan of seduction; the bond which united Madame to his brother was or at least seemed to him an insuperable barrier; he was even too far from that barrier to perceive that it existed. But on the slope of those passions in which the heart rejoices and towards which youth impels us, no one can say where he will stop, not even the one who in advance has calculated all the chances of his success or failure.

As for Madame, her fancy for the King may easily be explained: she was young, coquettish, and passionately fond of admiration. Hers was one of those impetuous natures which, in a theatre, would leap over glowing coals to win a shout of applause from the audience. It was not surprising, therefore, that having been adored by Luckingham and De Guiche, who was superior to Buckingham, even if it were only from that great merit, novelty, so thoroughly appreciated by women, — it was not surprising, we say, that the princess should raise her ambition to the point of being admired by the King, who not only was the first person in the kingdom, but one of the handsomest and cleverest. As to the sudden passion of Louis for his sister-in-law, physiology would explain it by commonplace reasoning, and Nature by some of her mysterious affinities. Madame had the most beautiful black eyes in the world; Louis the most beautiful blue ones. Madame was

merry and unreserved; Louis melancholy and diffident. Summoned to meet each other for the first time on the ground of interest and common curiosity, these two opposite natures were influenced by the contact of their reciprocal contradictions of character. On his return to his room, Louis realized that Madame was the most fascinating woman at court. Madame, when alone, was happy in the thought that she had produced a deep impression on the King.

But this sentiment with her must remain quiet, while with the King it could not fail to act with all the vehemence natural to the passionate temperament of a young man, and of a young man who had only to wish in order to see his wishes carried out.

In the first place, the King announced to Monsieur that everything was calmed; that Madame felt for him the greatest respect, the most sincere affection; but that she was of a haughty character, ever quick to take offence, and that her sensitiveness must be carefully considered. Monsieur replied in the mild tone he usually took with his brother that he could not very well consider the susceptibilities of a woman whose conduct, in his opinion, gave rise to censure, and that if any one had a right to be wounded it was he, Monsieur, and without doubt he had this right.

The King said hastily, which proved the interest he took in his sister-in-law:

"Madame is above censure, thank God!"

"The censure of others, yes, I admit that," said Monsieur; "but not above mine, I presume."

Well," said the King, "I wish to say that Madame's conduct does not deserve your censure. She undoubtedly is a careless and strange young woman, but she professes the best feelings. The English character is not always thoroughly understood in France, brother, and the liberty of English manners sometimes surprises those who do not know to what extent this liberty is the outcome of innocence."

"Ah," said Monsieur, more and more piqued, "from the moment your Majesty absolves the wife whom I accuse, the wife is guiltless and I have nothing more to say."

"Brother," resumed the King, quickly, hearing the voice of conscience, which was whispering in his heart that Monsieur was not entirely wrong, "brother, what I do and what I say is for your happiness. I heard that you had complained of a

lack of confidence or respect on the part of Madame, and I did not wish your anxiety to be prolonged. It is part of my duty to watch over your house as over that of my humblest subjects. I therefore saw with the greatest pleasure that your fears were groundless."

"And," continued Monsieur, in an interrogative tone, fixing his eyes upon his brother, "what your Majesty has discovered for Madame — and I bow before your royal wisdom — have you also verified for those who have been the cause of the scandal of which I complain?"

"You are right, brother," said the King. "I will look into this."

These words contained an order as well as a consolation. The prince felt this and withdrew.

As for Louis, he went to find his mother; he realized that he had need of a more complete absolution than that which he had just received from his brother.

Anne of Austria had not for M. de Guiche the same reasons for indulgence which she had had for Buckingham. She saw at the first words that Louis was not disposed to be severe; she was so disposed. It was one of the usual ruses of the good queen to succeed in knowing the truth.

But Louis was no longer serving his apprenticeship. Already for almost a year he had been King, and during this time he had learned how to dissemble.

Listening to Anne of Austria in order to let her disclose all her thoughts, giving approval only by look or gesture, he became convinced from certain piercing glances, from certain skilful insinuations, that the queen, so clear-sighted in matters of gallantry, had, if not guessed, at least suspected his weakness for Madame.

Of all his auxiliaries Anne of Austria would be the most important; of all his enemies Anne of Austria would be the most dangerous. Louis, therefore, changed his tactics. He accused Madame, absolved Monsieur, listened to what his mother had to say of De Guiche as he had listened to what she had said of Buckingham. Then when he saw that she thought she had gained a complete victory over him he left her.

The whole court — that is, all the favorites and intimates, and they were many, since there were already five masters — assembled in the evening for the ballet.

This interval had been occupied by poor De Guiche in re-

ceiving some visits. Among the number was one which involved almost equally his hopes and fears. It was that of the Chevalier de Lorraine. About three o'clock in the afternoon the chevalier entered De Guiche's rooms. His looks were most reassuring.

Monsieur, said he to De Guiche, was in splendid humor and no one would have said that the slightest cloud had passed over the conjugal sky. Besides, Monsieur had so little ill-feeling.

For a long time past the chevalier had decided that of the two sons of Louis XIII. Monsieur was the one who had inherited his father's character, an uncertain, irresolute disposition; good by flashes, bad at bottom, and certainly of no account to his friends.

He cheered De Guiche especially by pointing out to him that Madame would soon succeed in managing her husband, and that consequently one who succeeded in governing Madame would ultimately govern Monsieur.

To which De Guiche, full of mistrust and presence of mind, replied:

"Yes, chevalier, but I believe Madame is very dangerous."

"In what respect?"

"In that she has perceived that Monsieur has no very passionate feelings for women."

"That is true," said the chevalier, laughing.

"And then —"

"Well?"

"Well, Madame will choose the first comer as the object of her preference in order to win back her husband through jealousy."

"Deep! deep!" exclaimed the chevalier.

"But true," replied De Guiche.

And neither was expressing his real thought.

While De Guiche was thus attacking Madame's character he was mentally asking her forgiveness from the bottom of his heart.

While admiring De Guiche's penetration the chevalier was leading him blindfolded towards a precipice.

De Guiche then questioned him more directly upon the effect produced by the scene of the morning and upon the still more serious result of the scene at dinner.

"Why, I have already told you that they are laughing at it," replied the chevalier, "and Monsieur most of all."

"And yet," hazarded De Guiche. "they spoke to me of a visit the King paid Madame."

"Yes, exactly; Madame was the only one who did not laugh, and the King went to her in order to make her do so."

"So that —"

"So that nothing is changed in the arrangement of the day."

"And they are to repeat the ballet this evening?"

"Certainly."

"You are sure?"

"Perfectly."

At this point in the conversation between the two young men Raoul entered with anxious brow.

On perceiving him, the chevalier, who had a secret dislike for him as for every noble character, rose.

"You advise me, then?" demanded De Guiche of the chevalier.

"I advise you to sleep in peace, my dear count."

"And I, De Guiche," said Raoul, "will give you exactly opposite advice."

"What is it, my friend?"

"To mount your horse and set out for one of your estates; on your arrival, if you wish to follow the advice of the chevalier, you will sleep as long and as quietly as it may please you to do so."

"What, go away?" cried the chevalier, feigning surprise.

"Why should De Guiche leave?"

"Because, — and you especially ought not to be ignorant of this, — because every one is already talking of a scene which has passed between Monsieur and De Guiche."

De Guiche turned pale.

"Not at all," replied the chevalier, "not at all! You have been wrongly informed, M. de Bragelonne."

"On the contrary, I have been correctly informed, monsieur," replied Raoul, "and the advice I am giving De Guiche is that of a friend."

During this discussion De Guiche, somewhat alarmed, looked alternately at one and the other of his advisers. He inwardly felt that a game, important for the rest of his life, was being played at that moment.

"Is it not true," said the chevalier, interrogating the count

himself, "is it not true, De Guiche, that the scene was not so stormy as the Vicomte de Bragelonne seems to think? Moreover, he was not there."

"Monsieur," persisted Raoul, "stormy or not, it is not exactly of the scene that I am speaking, but of its possible results. I know that Monsieur has threatened; I know that Madame has cried."

"Madame cried?" exclaimed De Guiche imprudently, clasp-
ing his hands.

"Ah!" said the chevalier, laughing, "here is a detail of which I was ignorant. You are certainly better informed than I, M. de Bragelonne."

"And it is because I am better informed than you, chevalier, that I insist on De Guiche's leaving."

"No, no; I regret at having to contradict you, monsieur, but this departure is useless."

"It is urgent."

"But why should he leave? Come."

"Why, the King—"

"The King?" cried De Guiche.

"Why, yes; I tell you the King has this at heart."

"Bah!" said the chevalier, "the King likes De Guiche, and was especially fond of his father; reflect that if the count were to leave, it would be admitting that he has done something reprehensible."

"How so?"

"When one runs away, it is because he is guilty or afraid."

"Or because he is offended, like a man wrongly accused," said Bragelonne. "Let us give for his departure the motive of offence; nothing is easier; we will say that we both did our best to keep him, and you at least will not be lying. Come, come, De Guiche, you are innocent; the scene of to-day must have wounded you. Go away, De Guiche."

"No, De Guiche, remain," said the chevalier, "as M. de Bragelonne said, because you are innocent. Your pardon once again, vicomte, but my opinion is exactly the opposite of yours."

"You are free to keep it, monsieur; but mark well that the exile which De Guiche will impose on himself will be of short duration. He can end it when he pleases and, returning from voluntary exile, will find a smile on every lip, while on the contrary the ill-temper of the King may rouse a storm the length of which no one would dare predict."

The chevalier smiled.

"Zounds! that is just what I want," he murmured in a low tone to himself, shrugging his shoulders.

This movement did not escape the count, who feared that if he left the court he would seem to be yielding to a sentiment of fear.

"No, no!" he cried. "It is decided. I shall stay, Bragelonne."

"I am a prophet," said Raoul, sadly. "Misfortune will befall you, De Guiche."

"I, too, am a prophet, but not a prophet of evil; so I say to you, count, remain."

"Are you sure that the ballet will take place?" asked De Guiche.

"Quite sure."

"Well, you see, Raoul," resumed De Guiche, trying to smile, "you see that a court at which dancing is carried on so assiduously is not a very sombre court or one ready to enter into internal dissensions. You must acknowledge that, Raoul."

Raoul shook his head. "I have nothing further to say," said he.

"But," inquired the chevalier, curious to discover whence Raoul had obtained his information, the truth of which he was forced to admit, "you say you are well-informed, monsieur; how can you be more so than I, who am one of the prince's most intimate friends?"

"Monsieur," replied Raoul, "I bow before such a declaration. You ought to be perfectly well informed, I admit, and as a man of honor is incapable of stating anything that he does not believe I shall keep silent, confess myself defeated, and leave you the battlefield."

Whereupon Raoul, like a man who seems to desire only rest, threw himself into a deep armchair, while the count called his attendants to help him dress.

The chevalier realized that time was slipping away and wished to leave, but feared that Raoul, left alone with De Guiche, might prevail on him to change his mind.

Therefore he used his last resource.

"Madame will be resplendent," said he. "She appears to-day in her costume of Pomona."

"That is true!" exclaimed the count.

"Yes," continued the chevalier, "and she has just given

orders to that effect. You know, monsieur, the King is to appear as Spring."

"It will be admirable," said De Guiche. "And a better reason for remaining than any you have given is the fact that I am to be Autumn and shall dance with Madame; I cannot go away without the King's orders, for my departure would break up the ballet."

"And I," said the chevalier, "am to be a simple *Egyptian*. It is true that I am a poor dancer and that my limbs are not well formed. Au revoir, gentlemen. Do not forget the basket of fruit which you are to present to Pomona, count."

"Oh, I shall forget nothing, you may be sure," said De Guiche, delighted.

"I am perfectly sure now that he will not leave," mused the chevalier as he went out.

The chevalier gone, Raoul did not even attempt to dissuade his friend; he felt it would be time thrown away.

"Count," said he to him in his sad and melodious voice, "you are embarking in a terrible enterprise. I know you always go to extremes; the one you love does the same. Well, I admit for the time being that she may love you —"

"Oh, never!" cried De Guiche.

"Why do you say 'never'?"

"Because it would be a great misfortune for both of us."

"In that case, my dear friend, instead of regarding you as simply imprudent, permit me to consider you as mad."

"Why?"

"Are you very sure, now, answer me frankly, that you desire nothing from the one you love?"

"Oh, yes, very sure."

"Then love her from afar."

"How do you mean, from afar?"

"What difference does it make to you whether you are present or absent since you desire nothing from her? Love a portrait, a memory."

"Raoul!"

"Love a shadow, an illusion, a chimera; love love itself, only giving a name for your ideal. Ah, you turn aside your head. Your servants are coming, I shall say nothing further. In good or bad fortune, De Guiche, count on me."

"Rest assured I do."

"Well, that is all I have to say to you. Make yourself look well, De Guiche, make yourself look your best. Farewell."

"You are not coming back to the ballet, vicomte?"

"No, I have a visit to make in town. Good-bye, De Guiche, good-bye."

The reunion took place in the King's apartments. In the first place there were the queens, then Madame, then some chosen ladies of honor and a goodly number of courtiers, also chosen, who spent the time before the dance conversing as one could converse in those days. None of the ladies who had been invited wore the costumes of the fête as the chevalier had predicted, but there was a good deal of talk about the rich and ingenious costumes designed by different painters for the ballet of the demi-gods. This was the name given to the King and the queens for whom Fontainebleau was going to be the pantheon.

Monsieur arrived holding in his hand the design which represented his costume; he still looked somewhat anxious; his salute to the young Queen and to his mother was full of courtesy and affection. He bowed in the most cavalier manner to Madame, then turned on his heel. This action and his coldness were noticed by all.

M. de Guiche indemnified the princess by his passionate glance, and on raising her eyes Madame, it must be confessed, returned it with interest.

Never had De Guiche looked so handsome; Madame's glance had in some way illumined the face of the son of the *Maréchal de Grammont*. The sister-in-law of the King felt a storm brewing above her head; she felt also that during the day so fruitful in future events she had committed an injustice if not an act of grave treason towards one who loved her with so much ardor and passion.

The moment seemed to her to have come to render an account to the poor victim of this injustice of the morning. Madame's heart was then speaking the name of De Guiche. The count was sincerely pitied, therefore he won over all others. It was no longer a question of Monsieur, of the King, or of the Duke of Buckingham. De Guiche reigned supreme.

Monsieur, too, was very handsome, although it was impossible to compare him with the count. It is well known —

all women say so — that there is always a great difference between the beauty of a husband and that of a lover.

But in the present case, after Monsieur was gone, after his courteous and affectionate salutation to the young Queen and to the queen mother, after his careless and indifferent recognition of Madame which had been noticed by all the courtiers — all these motives, we say, gave the lover the advantage over the husband.

Monsieur was too great a personage to consider such a detail. There is nothing so efficacious as a well-founded idea of superiority to prove the inferiority of the man who holds an exalted opinion of himself.

The King arrived. Every one looked for events in the glance which was beginning to move the world, like the brow of Jupiter Tonans.

Louis had none of his brother's melancholy. He was radiant. Having examined most of the designs which were shown to him on every side, he gave his opinion or his criticism, and by a single word made some happy and others miserable.

Suddenly his glance, which was smilingly directed towards Madame, noticed the mute correspondence transpiring between the princess and the count. The royal lips were compressed, and when they were again opened to utter a few common-places he said, advancing towards the queens:

"Mesdames, I have received word that everything is prepared according to my instructions at Fontainebleau."

A murmur of satisfaction arose from the groups. The King read on every face the great desire to receive an invitation to the festivities.

"I shall leave to-morrow," he added.

Profound silence reigned among those present.

"And I invite," added the King, "all those who are here to make themselves ready to accompany me."

A smile illuminated every face. Monsieur's alone retained its look of ill-humor.

Thereupon the lords and ladies defiled successively before the King, hastening to thank his Majesty for the great honor of the invitation.

When it was De Guiche's turn:

"Ah, monsieur," said the King to him, "I did not see you."

The count saluted. Madame grew pale.

De Guiche was about to open his lips to frame his thanks.

"Count," said the King, "this is the time of the second sowing. I am sure that your farmers in Normandy will see you with pleasure on your estates," after which brutal attack Louis turned his back upon the unfortunate man.

It was De Guiche's turn to grow pale; he took two steps towards the King, forgetting that one never speaks to majesty without having been questioned.

"I do not quite understand," he stammered.

The King turned his head slightly and with a cold and fixed glance, which pierced like a relentless sword the hearts of those in disgrace, repeated, slowly pronouncing the words one by one :

"I said your estates."

A cold perspiration mounted to the count's brow ; his hands opened and he dropped the hat which he was holding between his trembling fingers.

Louis sought his mother's glance as if to show her that he was master ; he sought his brother's triumphant look as though to ask if his vengeance was to his liking. Lastly his eyes fell upon Madame, who was smiling and talking with Madame de Noailles. She had heard nothing, or rather had pretended to hear nothing.

The Chevalier de Lorraine looked on also with one of those glances of enmity that seem to give to a man's eye the power of a lever when it raises an obstacle, wrenches it away, and hurls it to a distance.

M. de Guiche remained alone in the King's cabinet ; every one else had departed ; before the eyes of the wretched man shadows seemed to dance.

Suddenly he overcame the fixed despair which had hitherto dominated him and hastened to shut himself up in his own room, in which Raoul was still waiting immovable in his gloomy presentiments.

"Well ?" murmured the latter, seeing his friend enter bare-headed, with wild eyes and tottering gait.

"Yes, yes, it is true ! Yes —"

And unable to say more, De Guiche fell prone upon the sofa.

"And she ?" asked Raoul.

"She ?" exclaimed the unfortunate man, raising to heaven a fist clinched in anger ; "she ?"

"What did she say?"

"She said that her dress was becoming."

"What did she do?"

"She laughed."

And a fit of wild laughter seemed to shatter the very nerves of the poor man. He fell back, completely overcome.

CHAPTER XVI.

FONTAINEBLEAU.

For four days every means of enchantment brought together in the magnificent gardens of Fontainebleau made the place one of delight.

M. Colbert looked after everything. In the morning there were the expenses of the night to be settled; during the day, programmes, essays, enrolments, payments. M. Colbert had amassed four millions, and disposed of them with wise economy. He was frightened at the expenses to which mythology led. Every wood nymph, every dryad, cost no less than a hundred livres a day. The costume came to three hundred livres.

What was consumed in powder and sulphur for fireworks amounted every night to a hundred thousand livres. There were, besides, illuminations on the edge of the lake, which cost thirty thousand livres every evening.

The fêtes had been magnificent. Colbert could not contain himself for joy. Every now and then he saw Madame and the King setting out on some hunting party, or for the reception of fantastic personages, solemn occasions which had been improvised a fortnight previous, and which showed off Madame's wit and the King's munificence.

Madame, the heroine of the festival, replied to the addresses of the deputations from unknown races — Garamanthians, Scythians, Hyperboreans, Caucasians, and Patagonians, who seemed to issue from the ground for the purpose of congratulating her; and to every representative of these peoples the King gave a diamond or other article of value.

Then in verses more or less grotesque the deputies compared

the King to the sun, Madame to Phœbe, the sun's sister. The queens and Monsieur were no more spoken of than if the King had married Henrietta of England, and not Maria Teresa of Austria. The happy couple, hand in hand, imperceptibly pressing fingers, drank long draughts of the sweet beverage of adulation, by which youth, beauty, power, and love are enhanced.

Every one at Fontainebleau was surprised at the extent of the influence which Madame had acquired so rapidly over the King. Every one whispered that Madame was really the queen. And in short Louis proclaimed this strange truth by his every thought, word, and glance.

He formed his wishes, he sought his inspirations, from Madame's eyes, and he was overcome with joy when Madame deigned to smile. Was Madame on her side intoxicated by her power on seeing the world at her feet? She herself could not say, but what she did know was that she wished for nothing, and that she felt perfectly happy.

The result of all these changes, the source of which lay in the royal will, was that Monsieur instead of being the second personage in the kingdom had really become the third. It was much worse than when De Guiche had had his guitars played in Madame's apartments. Then Monsieur at least had the satisfaction of inspiring fear in the one who annoyed him. But since the departure of the enemy, who had been sent away by his alliance with the King, Monsieur had on his shoulders a yoke heavier than before.

Every evening Madame returned worn out.

Riding, baths in the Seine, plays, dinners in the open, balls on the banks of the grand canal, concerts, all this would have been enough to kill not only a frail, slender woman, but the most robust guard of the château.

It is true that at dances, concerts, and promenades a woman is much stronger than the most vigorous youth from the thirteen cantons. But however great a woman's strength may be, it has its limit, and it cannot hold out long against such a system.

As to Monsieur, he did not even have the satisfaction of seeing Madame abdicate royalty in the least. She lived in the royal pavilion with the young Queen and the queen mother.

It goes without saying that the Chevalier de Lorraine did

not leave Monsieur, but poured his drop of gall into every wound the latter received.

The result was that Monsieur, who at first had been wholly joyful and happy over the departure of De Guiche, subsided into melancholy three days after the installation of the court at Fontainebleau.

Now it happened that one day, about two o'clock, Monsieur, who had risen late, and who had given more care than usual to his toilet, — it happened, we say, that Monsieur, who had heard nothing spoken of for that day, conceived the idea of gathering his court about him and carrying Madame off for supper at Moret, where he had a beautiful country-house.

Accordingly he set out to the pavilion of the queens, and on entering was greatly astonished at finding no one of the royal suite there.

He went into the apartment alone. A door at the left opened into Madame's room; one on the right into the young Queen's. Monsieur learned from a serving-woman that every one had gone at eleven o'clock to bathe in the Seine, that a great fête had been made of the event, that all the carriages had been stationed at the gates of the park, and that they had all been gone for over an hour.

"Good!" said Monsieur; "the idea is a fine one; it is dreadfully warm. I myself shall be glad to bathe."

And he called his attendants. None came. He went to Madame's apartments; every one had gone. He turned to the stables. A groom informed him that there were no carriages left in the carriage-houses.

He then gave orders for two horses to be saddled, one for himself, the other for his valet. The groom replied politely that there were no horses either. Monsieur, pale with anger, went back to the Queen's rooms. He entered the oratory of Anne of Austria.

Through a half-drawn curtain he perceived his young sister-in-law kneeling before the queen mother and apparently weeping. He had been neither seen nor heard. He approached the door gently and listened; the sight of such grief aroused his curiosity.

Not only was the young Queen weeping, but she was complaining too.

"Yes," she was saying, "the King neglects me, the King thinks only of amusing himself and of those pleasures in which I do not take part."

"Patience, patience, my daughter," replied Anne of Austria in Spanish.

Then, still in Spanish, she added some words of advice which Monsieur could not understand.

The Queen replied by accusations mingled with sighs and tears, among which Monsieur frequently distinguished the word "*banos*," which Maria Teresa emphasized with angry scorn.

"The baths," said Monsieur to himself, "the baths. It seems that it is the baths that have made her angry."

And he strove to put together the different words which he had understood. However, it was easy to guess that the Queen was complaining bitterly, and that if Anne of Austria was not consoling her she was at least trying to do so. Fearing that he would be discovered listening at the door, Monsieur gave a cough.

At the sound the two queens turned.

Monsieur entered; whereupon the young Queen rose hurriedly and dried her eyes.

Monsieur knew his audience too well to ask any questions, and being too courteous to remain silent, he bowed. The queen mother smiled pleasantly at him.

"What do you want, my son?" said she.

"I? — nothing —" stammered Monsieur, "I was looking for —"

"Whom?"

"Mother, I was looking for Madame."

"Madame is at the baths."

"And the King?" said Monsieur, in a tone that made the Queen tremble.

"The King and the whole court are there as well," replied Anne of Austria.

"Without you, Madame?" said Monsieur.

"Oh, I," said the young Queen, "I spread a pall over all who are seeking pleasure."

"I too, apparently," said Monsieur.

Anne of Austria made a sign to her daughter-in-law, who retired bathed in tears.

Monsieur frowned.

"What a gloomy house!" said he. "What do you think of it, mother?"

"Why, no, every one here is pleasure hunting."

"Odds-fish! that is exactly what saddens those who are bored by pleasure."

"How you talk, my dear Philippe!"

"Faith, mother, I say what I think."

"Explain yourself. What is the matter?"

"Why, ask my sister-in-law, who just now was telling you all her troubles."

"Her troubles — what?"

"Oh, I heard. By chance, I admit, but I heard, nevertheless, I distinctly heard my sister complaining of Madame's famous baths."

"Oh, nonsense!"

"No, no, when one weeps one is not always silly. The Queen said '*banos*.' Does not that mean baths?"

"I repeat, my son," said Anne of Austria, "your sister-in-law is childishly jealous."

"In that case, Madame," replied the prince, "I accuse myself very humbly of having the same fault that she has."

"You too, my son?"

"Yes."

"You too? you jealous of these baths?"

"Certainly."

"Oh!"

"The idea! The King goes to bathe with my wife and does not take the Queen. The idea! Madame goes to bathe with the King, and they do not inform me. And you expect my sister-in-law to be content? and you expect me to be content?"

"Why, my dear Philippe," said Anne of Austria, "you exaggerate. You had M. Buckingham sent away, you have exiled M. de Guiche; do you want now to send the King away from Fontainebleau?"

"Oh, I would not presume to have such a thought, Madame," said Monsieur, bitterly, "but I can withdraw, and I shall."

"Jealous of the King! Jealous of your brother!"

"Jealous of my brother! Jealous of the King! Yes, Madame, jealous! jealous! jealous!"

"Well, Monsieur," cried Anne of Austria, pretending indignation and anger, "I am beginning to believe you are mad and

a sworn enemy to my peace. I shall therefore leave the place to you, having no means of defending myself against such vagaries."

She finished speaking, raised the siege, and left Monsieur a prey to the most violent rage.

He stood for a moment completely overcome, then recovering himself and summoning all his courage he returned to the stables, found the groom, again demanded a carriage and a horse, and on the repeated reply that neither was to be had he seized a whip from the hands of a stable boy, and rushing after the poor groom, in spite of his cries and excuses, beat him all round the court-yard. Then exhausted, out of breath, dripping with perspiration, trembling in every limb, he returned to his own apartments, smashed his most beautiful porcelain, and finally, booted and spurred as he was, threw himself on his bed shrieking "Help!"

CHAPTER XVII.

THE BATH.

At Valvins, beneath the impenetrable arches of flowering osiers and willows which, inclining their green heads, dip their leaves into the blue waters, a long flat boat, with ladders enclosed in blue curtains, served as a refuge for the bathing Dianas, who as they left the water were watched by twenty plumed Actæons, galloping eagerly and full of admiration along the mossy and perfumed bank of the river.

But Diana, even the chaste Diana, draped in her flowing chlamys, was less chaste, less impenetrable than Madame, as young and beautiful as the goddess. For, notwithstanding the long tunic of the huntress, her round white knee could be seen; notwithstanding the sonorous quiver, her brown shoulders were visible. While as for Madame, a veil wrapped around her a hundred times completely enveloped her as she returned to the arms of her women and rendered her inaccessible to the most indiscreet as well as to the most penetrating gaze.

When she had ascended the ladder the poets who were present, — and all were poets when it was a question of Madame, — the twenty poets who had been galloping about stopped, and

with one accord cried out that they were not drops of water but pearls which were dropping from Madame's body to be lost again in the happy river.

The King, the central figure of these rhymesters and of this homage, imposed silence on the admirers whose imaginations never seemed at a loss, and rode away for fear of offending, even through the silken curtains, the modesty of the woman and the dignity of the princess.

At once there was a great void in the scene and silence in the boat. From the play of the curtains, from the undulations of their folds, one could guess the coming and the going of the attendants engaged in their duties.

The King listened smilingly to the remarks of his courtiers, but one could see by looking at him that his thoughts were elsewhere.

In fact, scarcely had the sound of the rings drawn along the poles told him that Madame was dressed and that the goddess was about to reappear, than his Majesty returned at once to the river bank and gave the signal to all whom duty or pleasure called to Madame.

The pages hurried about leading horses by the bridles; the carriages which had been standing under the trees were brought near the tent; then came a crowd of valets, porters, and women who while their masters were bathing had been making their own observations aside, their criticisms, their discussions, — the fugitive journal of that epoch of which to-day nothing is remembered, even by the waves which mirrored the actors and echoed their conversation — the waves, witnesses submerged by God in immensity, as the actors have been lost in infinity.

All the people crowding upon the banks of the river, not to speak of a group of peasants drawn thither by a desire to see the King and the princess, formed the most disorderly but the most good-natured crowd imaginable.

The King dismounted, the courtiers imitated him. He offered his hand to Madame, whose rich riding habit set off her fine figure, showing to advantage beneath that garment made of fine woollen embroidered in silver.

Her hair, still damp and blacker than jet, hung over her pure white neck. Joy and health sparkled in her beautiful eyes. She was calm, although highly strung, and drew in long draughts of air under the embroidered parasol held over her by a page.

Nothing could have been more tender, more graceful, or more poetic than those two figures in the glow cast by the rose-colored parasol; the King whose white teeth shone in a constant smile; Madame whose black eyes sparkled like carbuncles in the glittering reflection of the changeable silk.

Madame reached her horse, an animal of magnificent Andalusian breed, spotlessly white, somewhat heavy perhaps, but with a fine intelligent head, in which the mixture of Arabian blood happily combined with Spanish could be readily traced, and whose long tail swept the ground. But as the princess feigned difficulty in mounting, the King lifted her in such a way that Madame's arms formed a circle of fire around his neck.

On withdrawing Louis involuntarily touched with his lips the arm, which was not withheld. Then the princess thanked her royal equerry and all sprang at once to saddle.

The King and Madame drew aside to let the carriages, the outriders, and the runners pass.

A goodly number of cavaliers, freed from the yoke of etiquette, gave rein to their horses and darted after the carriages which held the maids of honor, as fresh as so many wood nymphs around Diana, and the whirlwind, laughing, chatting, noisy, swept on.

The King and Madame walked their horses.

Behind his Majesty and the princess, his sister-in-law, but at a respectful distance, followed the serious courtiers or those desirous of being within reach or under the eyes of the King, restraining their impatient steeds, regulating their pace according to that of the King and Madame, and giving themselves up to all the sweetness and pleasure found in the conversation of clever people who can with courtesy make a thousand atrocious remarks about their neighbors.

In their stifled laughter, in the reticence of their sardonic humor, Monsieur, the poor absent one, was not spared. But they pitied and mourned over the lot of De Guiche, and it must be confessed that their sympathy was not misplaced.

However, the King and Madame having allowed their horses to breathe, and having repeated a hundred times all that the courtiers had suggested to them, set off at a gallop, and the deep glades of the forest resounded under the tread of the company.

To conversations in low tones, to remarks in the form of confidences, to words exchanged with a sort of mystery, succeeded noisy bursts.

Gayety spread from outrider to prince; the magpies and the jays fled away with their guttural cries under the leafy arches of the vales; the cuckoo interrupted his monotonous cry in the depths of the woods; the chaffinches and the tomtits flew in coveys; while the deer fled affrighted into the midst of the thickets.

This crowd, spreading as it went joy, noise, and light along its passage, was preceded, so to speak, to the château by its own clamor.

The King and Madame entered the town, both being received by the universal acclamations of the throngs.

Madame hastened to find Monsieur. She realized instinctively that he had been too long excluded from the festivities. The King went to rejoin the queens. He knew he owed them, one at least, some compensation for his long absence.

But Madame was not received by Monsieur. She was told that he was sleeping.

Instead of meeting Maria Teresa smiling as usual, the King met Anne of Austria in the gallery, who, watching for his return, went forward, took him by the hand, and led him to her own room.

What the queen mother said to Louis XIV. will never be known, but one might easily guess it from the annoyed expression of the King at the close of this interview. But we, whose mission it is to interpret as well as to impart our interpretations to the reader, should fail in our duty if we left him ignorant of the outcome of this interview. He will find it sufficiently developed, or at least we hope so, in the succeeding chapter.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE BUTTERFLY CHASE.

ON returning to his rooms to give some orders and to settle his ideas, the King found on his toilet-table a little note, the handwriting of which seemed disguised.

He opened it and read, "*Come quickly. I have a thousand things to tell you.*"

There had not been a long enough time since his Majesty had

left Madame for these thousand things to be the result of the three thousand which they had said to each other on the way from Valvins to Fontainebleau. So the apparent confusion and haste of the note gave the King much to think about.

He bestowed but little time on his toilet and set off to pay a visit to Madame.

The princess, who did not wish to appear to expect him, had gone to the garden with all her ladies.

When the King heard that Madame had left her apartments for a walk he called all his gentlemen that could be found and invited them to follow him to the gardens.

Madame was having a butterfly chase on a wide lawn bordered with heliotrope and heather. She was watching the boldest and the youngest of her ladies, who was running about, and with her back turned to the hedge was impatiently awaiting the arrival of the King, with whom she had planned this meeting.

The sound of feet on the gravel made her turn around. Louis XIV. was bareheaded; he had struck down with his cane a peacock butterfly which M. de Saint-Aignan had picked up from the ground quite stunned.

"You see, Madame," said the King, "that I too am hunting for you." And he approached.

"Gentlemen," said he, turning to those in his suite, "each one of you do as well for these ladies."

This was the signal for every one to leave.

Then there was seen a curious sight; old and corpulent courtiers ran after butterflies, losing their hats in the effort, and with raised canes charging upon the myrtle and the heather as they would have done upon Spaniards.

The King offered Madame his hand and chose with her as the centre of observation a bench covered with a roof of moss, a sort of *châlet* made by the timid genius of some gardener, who had inaugurated the picturesque and the fanciful in the midst of the severe style of the gardens of that time.

This retreat, covered with nasturtiums and climbing roses, hid a bench so that the spectators, isolated though in the centre of the lawn, saw and were seen from every side, but could not be heard without themselves seeing those who had drawn near to listen.

From this seat, on which the two had sat down, the King made a sign of encouragement to the hunters; then as if he

were talking with Madame of the butterfly transfixed by a gold pin and affixed to his hat :

"Are we not well placed here for talking?" said he.

"Yes, Sire, for I wanted to be heard by you alone and seen by every one."

"And I too," said Louis.

"Did my note surprise you?"

"Terrified me! But what I have to say to you is more important."

"Oh, no! Do you know that Monsieur has closed his door to me?"

"To you! And why?"

"Can you not guess?"

"Ah! Madame, but in that case both of us had the same thing to say to each other."

"What happened to you?"

"Shall I begin?"

"Yes. I have told everything."

"Then it is my turn. You must know that on my return I found my mother, who took me to her own rooms."

"Oh, the queen mother!" said Madame, anxiously, "it is serious, then!"

"I think so. This is what she said to me. But in the first place let me preface what I have to say by a remark."

"Speak, Sire."

"Has Monsieur ever spoken to you of me?"

"Often."

"Has he ever spoken of his jealousy?"

"Oh, more frequently still."

"About me?"

"No, but about —"

"Yes, I know; about Buckingham and De Guiche."

"Exactly."

"Well, Madame, Monsieur is at present jealous of me."

"So!" replied the princess, smiling mischievously.

"And it seems to me that we have never given any reason —"

"Never! at least I have not. But how did you discover that Monsieur was jealous?"

"My mother told me that Monsieur went to her room perfectly furious; that he had a thousand complaints to make against your — forgive me."

"Go on, go on."

"Against your coquetry. It seems that Monsieur indulges in injustice too."

"You are very good, Sire."

"My mother reassured him; but he pretended that he had been reassured too often, and that he would not be so any longer."

"Would it not have been better for him not to have been anxious in the first place?"

"That is what I said."

"Admit, Sire, that the world is very evil. What! cannot a brother and a sister talk together, enjoy each other's society, without giving rise to comments and suspicions? For really, Sire, we are doing no wrong, and we have no wish to do any."

She looked at the King with that proud, provoking glance which rouses desire in the coldest and wisest.

"No, that is true," sighed Louis.

"Do you know, Sire, that if this continues I shall be forced to make trouble? Come, judge of our conduct; is it or is it not correct?"

"Certainly it is correct."

"Often alone, for we enjoy the same things, we might have been led into error, but have we been? For me, you are a brother, nothing more."

The King frowned. She went on:

"Your hand, which often comes into contact with mine, produces no agitation or emotion — which lovers, for instance —"

"Oh! enough, enough, I beg you!" said the King, in pain.

"You are pitiless and you will kill me."

"Why?"

"Well, you say distinctly that you feel nothing when with me."

"Oh, Sire, I did not say that; my affection —"

"Henrietta, enough, I beg of you again. If you think me marble like yourself, undeceive yourself."

"I do not understand you."

"Very well," sighed the King, lowering his eyes. "So our meetings, our hand-clasps, our glances — forgive me, you are right, and I know what you mean."

He hid his face in his hands.

"Take care, Sire," said Madame, quickly; "M. de Saint-Aignan is looking at you."

"That is true!" exclaimed Louis, enraged; "never the shadow of freedom, never any sincerity among my friends. I think I have found a friend, and he is only a spy — a friend, and she is nothing but a sister."

Madame was silent; her eyes fell.

"Monsieur is jealous!" she murmured in a tone, the sweetness and gentleness of which were indescribable.

"Oh," cried the King, suddenly, "you are right."

"You see clearly," said she, looking at him in a most captivating way, "you are free; you are not suspected; the entire joy of your house is not poisoned."

"Alas, you know nothing as yet; the Queen is jealous."

"Maria Teresa?"

"Madly. This jealousy of Monsieur's arose from hers; she wept, she complained to my mother, she reproached us for the bathing parties, which were so sweet to me."

"And to me," said Madame's eyes.

"Suddenly Monsieur listened, overheard the word '*banos*' uttered with bitterness by the Queen; this enlightened him. He entered frightened, mingled in the conversation, and quarrelled with my mother so bitterly that she had to leave him; so that you have to deal with a jealous husband, while I shall have to see before me, constantly, inexorably, the spectre of jealousy with swollen eyes, emaciated cheeks, and sinister mouth."

"Poor King!" murmured Madame, letting her hand wander over that of Louis.

He retained it, pressing it closely; but in order to avoid arousing the curiosity of the spectators, who were not so engrossed in searching for butterflies as not to be on the lookout for gossip as well, and to discover some mystery in the conversation of the King and Madame, Louis raised the dying butterfly nearer to his sister-in-law. Both leaned over to count the thousand eyes on its wings and the grains of their gold dust.

But neither spoke; their hair touched; their breath mingled; their burning hands lay clasped. Thus five minutes passed.

CHAPTER XIX.

WHAT WAS CAUGHT IN THE BUTTERFLY CHASE.

THE two young people remained for an instant with heads bent under the twin thought of dawning love, which gives birth to so many flowers in the imagination of twenty years of age.

Madame Henrietta glanced sidewise at Louis. Hers was one of those well-organized natures which know how to read themselves as well as to read others. She saw the love in Louis' heart as a skilful diver sees a pearl on the bed of the sea.

She saw that Louis was hesitating, perhaps in doubt, and that this indolent or timid heart must be encouraged.

"And so?" said she interrogatively, breaking the silence.

"What do you mean?" asked Louis, after waiting an instant.

"I mean that I shall have to return to the decision I made."

"Which one?"

"To the one I had already submitted to your Majesty."

"When was that?"

"The day we explained matters in regard to Monsieur's jealousy."

"What did you say to me that day?" asked Louis, anxiously.

"Do you not remember, Sire?"

"Alas! if it is some unhappiness, I shall remember it soon enough."

"Oh, it is misfortune only for me, Sire," replied Madame Henrietta; "but it is necessary."

"Ah! Say not so!"

"And I shall submit to it."

"Well, at least tell me what it is."

"Absence!"

"Oh, still that wretched resolution?"

"Sire, believe me, I did not make it without struggling violently with myself. Sire, it is necessary, really, for me to return to England."

"Oh, never, never! I shall not allow you to leave France!" cried the King.

"And yet," said Madame, affecting a sweet, sad firmness,

"and yet, Sire, nothing is more imperative. Furthermore, I am persuaded that such is your mother's wish."

"Wish!" cried the King. "Oh! oh! dear sister, that is a strange word to use to me."

"But," replied Madame Henrietta, smiling, "are you not glad to carry out the wishes of a good mother?"

"Enough, I beseech you; you break my heart."

"I?"

"Yes; you speak of this departure with a calmness —"

"I was not born to be happy, Sire," replied the princess, sadly; "and while still young I grew accustomed to seeing my dearest wishes thwarted."

"Are you speaking the truth? And will your departure thwart any desire which is dear to you?"

"If I were to answer 'yes,' is it true, Sire, that you would begin to take your misfortune patiently?"

"Cruel one!"

"Take care, Sire; some one is coming."

The King looked around.

"No," said he.

Then turning back to Madame:

"Come, Henrietta, instead of trying to contend against Monsieur's jealousy by a departure which would kill me —"

Henrietta shrugged her shoulders like a woman who doubts.

"Yes, which would kill me," replied Louis. "Come, instead of determining on this departure, does not your imagination — or, rather, does not your heart suggest something else?"

"And what do you want my heart to suggest to me?"

"Well, tell me how can one prove to some one that he is wrong to be jealous."

"In the first place, Sire, by giving him no motive for jealousy; that is, by loving none but him."

"Oh, I expected something better."

"What did you expect?"

"That you would answer simply that you could calm jealous people by dissimulating the affection you have for the object of their jealousy."

"It is difficult to dissimulate, Sire."

"And yet it is by overcoming difficulties that one attains happiness. As to me, I swear to you I shall give the lie to my jealous friends, if need be, by pretending to treat you like all other women."

"A poor and weak method," said the young woman, shaking her charming head.

"You think everything is bad, dear Henrietta," said Louis, discontented. "You object to everything I propose. At least, suggest something yourself. Come, try. I put great faith in the inventions of women. Think up something in your turn."

"Well, I suggest this. Are you listening, Sire?"

"How can you ask? You speak of my life or death, and ask me if I am listening!"

"Well, I judge by myself. If it were a question of putting me on the wrong scent as to the intentions of my husband, in regard to another woman, one thing, above all others, would reassure me."

"What is that?"

"In the first place it would be to see that he paid no attention to this woman."

"Well, that is exactly what I said just now."

"Very well. But in order to be fully reassured I should like to see him occupied with some one else."

"Ah! I understand," replied Louis, smiling. "But admit, dear Henrietta—"

"What?"

"If the method is ingenious, it is scarcely charitable."

"Why not?"

"In curing the fear of the wound in the mind of the jealous person, you inflict one in his heart. He no longer has any fear, it is true; but the evil still exists; and this seems to me worse."

"Agreed; but at least he does not detect, he does not suspect the real enemy; he does not harm love itself; he concentrates all his forces on the side where they will do no injury to anything or anybody. In a word, Sire, my plan, which I am surprised to see you dispute, harms the jealous people, it is true, but helps the lovers. Now, I ask you, Sire, except perhaps yourself, who ever thought of pitying jealous people? Are they not mournful beings, always equally unhappy, whether with or without cause? If you remove the cause, you will not destroy their suffering. The disease lies in the imagination, and like all imaginary ills, it is incurable. By the way, dear Sire, in this connection I remember an aphorism of my poor Doctor Dawley, a clever and witty physician whom, had

it not been for my brother, who cannot get along without him, I would now have with me. 'When you are likely to suffer from two affections,' he used to say, 'choose the one which will give you the least trouble; I will allow you to keep that; for, in good sooth!' said he, 'that is of the utmost importance to me, in order to enable me to rid you of the other.'"

"Well said, well thought out, Henrietta dear," replied the King, smiling.

"Oh, we have clever people in London, Sire."

"And these clever people train adorable scholars; this Daley, Darley, — what do you call him?"

"Dawley."

"Well, I shall give him from to-morrow a pension for his aphorism; but begin, Henrietta, I implore, by choosing the least of your evils. You do not answer, you smile; I guess the least of your troubles is to stay in France, is it not? I shall let you keep that evil, and in order to begin with the cure of the other, I shall look about from to-day for a subject to divert the jealous of either sex who persecute us."

"Hush! this time some one is really coming," said Madame.

And she bent down to pick a flower from the thick grass.

Some one was coming, as a matter of fact; for suddenly there ran down from the top of the hill a bevy of young women, followed by the cavaliers. The cause of this sudden onslaught was a magnificent hawk-moth with upper wings like the plumage of an owl, and under wings like the leaves of a rose.

This prey fell into the net of Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente, who showed it with pride to rivals less successful than herself.

The queen of the chase seated herself about twenty feet from the bench occupied by Louis and Madame Henrietta, and leaning back against magnificent oak entwined with ivy, stuck the butterfly on the end of her long cane.

Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente was very beautiful; so the men deserted the other women to press in a circle about her, under the pretext of complimenting her on her skill.

The King and the princess looked slyly at the scene, as spectators of another age regard the play of children.

"They are having a good time," said the King.

"Very good, Sire; I have always noticed that there is pleasure wherever there is youth and beauty."

"What do you say to Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente. Henrietta?" asked the King.

"I should say she is a little too fair," replied Madame, seizing at first glance the only defect to be found in the almost faultless beauty of the future Madame de Montespan.

"A little too fair, perhaps, but beautiful, it seems to me, in spite of that."

"Is that your opinion, Sire?"

"Yes."

"Well, it is mine too."

"And she is much sought after, you see."

"Oh, so far as that goes, yes; lovers are fluttering about. If we had had a lover chase instead of a butterfly chase you see what beautiful sport we should have had."

"Tell me, Henrietta, what would be said if the King were to mingle with all these lovers and let his glance fall on that side. Would some one else be jealous in that case?"

"Oh, Sire, Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente would be a very efficacious remedy," said Madame with a sigh, "she would cure a jealous man, it is true, but she might well make a woman jealous too."

"Henrietta! Henrietta!" exclaimed Louis, "you fill my heart with joy! yes, you are right; Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente is too beautiful to serve as a cloak."

"A king's cloak," said Madame Henrietta, smiling, "ought to be beautiful."

"Do you advise me to do that, then?" asked Louis.

"Oh! what can I say, Sire, except that to give such advice would be to furnish arms against myself? It would be folly or pride to advise you to take for the heroine of an assumed love a woman more beautiful than the one for whom you pretend to feel real love."

The King's hand sought Madame's; his eyes sought hers; then he murmured some words so tender but at the same time uttered in so low a tone that even the historian, who ought to hear everything, could not catch them. Then aloud:

"Well," said he, "choose yourself the one who is to cure our jealous friend. To her all my thoughts, all my attention, all the time which I can spare from business, shall be devoted. To her, Henrietta, shall be given the flower I shall pluck for you, the tender thoughts that you arouse in me; to her I shall give the glance that I dare not give you, and which ought to

help awaken you from your indifference. But choose well, lest in thinking of her, lest in offering her the rose plucked by my fingers, I should find myself conquered by you; and lest my looks, my hand, my lips, should turn at once to you, were the whole world to guess my secret."

While these words rushed from the lips of the King in a stream of love, Madame blushed, breathless, happy, proud, intoxicated. She found nothing to say in reply; her pride and her thirst for homage were satisfied.

"I shall fail," said she, raising her beautiful eyes, "but not as you entreat, for of all this incense which you wish to burn on the altar of another goddess, ah, Sire! I shall be jealous and shall want returned to me; nor must a particle of it be lost on the way. Therefore, Sire, with your royal permission, I shall choose one who will seem to me least capable of distracting you, and one who will let my image remain intact in your heart."

"Fortunately," said the King, "your heart is not hard; otherwise I should tremble at the threat you make me; we have taken our precautions on this point, and around you as around me it would be difficult to meet a sad-looking face."

While the King was speaking thus Madame had risen, and had glanced across the lawn. After a careful and silent survey she called Louis to her and said:

"Look, Sire! Do you see on the side of that hill near the cluster of snowballs that beautiful girl walking alone with head bent and arms hanging by her side, looking at the flowers she is crushing beneath her feet like one lost in thought?"

"Mademoiselle de la Vallière?" said the King.

"Yes."

"Oh!"

"Does she not suit you, Sire?"

"Why, look at the poor child! She is thin; there is scarcely any flesh on her bones."

"So I am fat, then?"

"But she is as sad as death."

"She will be a contrast to me who am accused of being too lively."

"But she is lame."

"Do you think so?"

"Certainly. Look, she has let every one pass in order that her defect may not be noticed."

"Well, she will not run as quickly as Daphne and cannot escape Apollo."

"Henrietta! Henrietta!" said the King, completely out of temper, "of all your maids of honor you have certainly chosen for me the least attractive."

"Yes, but she is one of my maids of honor. Note that."

"No doubt; but what do you mean?"

"I mean that in order to visit this new divinity you cannot fail to come to my rooms, and as propriety will forbid you to converse with the goddess alone you will be compelled to see her in my presence and to speak to me while speaking to her. I mean, in short, that those who are jealous will be wrong in thinking that you come to my apartments for me since you will come in reality for Mademoiselle de la Vallière."

"Who limps."

"Scarcely that."

"Who never opens her mouth."

"But who, when she does open it, shows pretty teeth."

"She might serve as a model for an osteologist."

"Your favor will make her fat."

"Henrietta!"

"Anyway, you let me choose?"

"Alas, yes!"

"Well, that is my choice; I impose her on you; so you must submit."

"Oh, I would submit to one of the Furies if you imposed her on me."

"La Vallière is as gentle as a lamb; you need not fear she will ever contradict you when you tell her you love her." And Madame began to laugh.

"Oh, you are not afraid that I shall tell her this too much, are you?"

"It would be for me."

"Very well."

"The treaty is made, then."

"Signed."

"You will keep for me the friendship of a brother, the attentions of a brother, the gallantry of a monarch, will you not?"

"I shall keep for you a heart which already has learned to beat only at your command."

"Very well; do you see that in this way the future is assured?"

"I hope so."

"Will your mother cease to regard me as an enemy?"

"Yes."

"Will Maria Teresa cease to speak in Spanish before Monsieur, who has a horror of conversations carried on in foreign languages because he always thinks that he is being maligned?"

"Alas, is he wrong?" murmured the King, tenderly.

"And lastly," went on the princess, "will people still accuse the King of having illegitimate loves when it is true that we feel nothing for each other unless it be pure sympathy?"

"Yes," murmured the King, "but they may say other things of us."

"What can they say, Sire? Shall we never be left in peace?"

"They will say," continued the King, "that I have poor taste; but what is my pride in comparison with your peace of mind?"

"With my honor, Sire, and with that of our family, you mean. Besides, believe me, do not be so quickly prejudiced against La Vallière; she limps, it is true, but she does not lack intelligence. Moreover, all that the King touches is converted into gold."

"Well, Madame, you may be certain of one thing, and that is I am still grateful to you; you might make me pay more dearly yet for your stay in France."

"Sire, some one is coming."

"Well?"

"A final word."

"What is it?"

"You are prudent and wise, Sire, but in this case you must call to your aid all your prudence and all your wisdom."

"Oh!" exclaimed Louis, laughing, "this very evening I shall begin to play my rôle, and you shall see whether I have not a vocation for the part of a shepherd lover. After lunch we are to make a grand excursion into the forest, then have supper, and the ballet at ten o'clock."

"I know it."

"My passion this evening shall blaze more brilliantly than the illuminations; shall shine more clearly than the lamps of our friend Colbert; it shall glow to such an extent that the eyes of the queens and of Monsieur will be blinded."

"Take care, Sire, take care!"

"In heaven's name what have I done?"

"I shall recall the compliments I paid you just now. You prudent? You wise, did I say? Why, you are beginning most foolishly. Can a passion be kindled like a torch, in a second? Does a king like yourself without any preparation fall at the feet of a girl like La Vallière?"

"Oh! Henrietta! Henrietta! I understand! We have not yet begun the campaign, and yet you are plundering me!"

"No, but I am recalling you to sane ideas. Kindle your passion by degrees, instead of making it burst forth all at once. Jupiter thunders and sends his shafts of lightning before burning palaces. Everything has a beginning. If you get so excited no one will believe you are in love, and every one will think you are mad — even if your plan is not guessed. People are less obtuse sometimes than they appear to be."

The King was obliged to admit that Madame was an angel for knowledge and a devil for subtlety. He bowed and said:

"Well, I shall think over my plan of attack; generals, my cousin De Condé, for example, grow pale over their strategical charts before they move a single one of the pawns which people call armies. I wish to draw up a complete plan of attack. You know that love is subdivided in a variety of ways. Well, I shall stop at the village of Small Attentions, at the hamlet of Love Letters, before taking the road of Visible Love; the way is clear, you know, and poor Mademoiselle de Scudéry would never forgive me for rushing past the stopping-places."

"Now we have returned to our senses, Sire; shall we part?"

"Alas, we must; for see, they are coming."

"Ah!" said Madame Henrietta, "they are bringing Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente's sphinx to us, with the trumpet-sounds in use with great hunters."

"It is perfectly understood, then; this evening, during the promenade, I shall glide into the forest, and finding La Vallière without you —"

"I shall look after that, and shall send her away."

"Very well! I shall speak to her in the midst of her companions, and shall let fly my first arrow."

"Aim well," said Madame, laughing, "and do not miss her heart." Whereupon the princess took leave of the King to meet the joyous troop, which was advancing with much ceremony and pretended flourishes of trumpets imitated by every mouth.

CHAPTER XX.

THE BALLET OF THE SEASONS.

AFTER the collation, which was served about five o'clock, the King entered his cabinet, in which his tailors were awaiting him for the purpose of trying on that famous costume of Spring which had cost so much thought to the designers and ornament-workers at court.

As to the ballet itself, every one knew his steps and how to take them. The King had decided to make it a surprise. Scarcely, therefore, had he finished his conference and returned to his rooms than he summoned his two masters of ceremony, Villeroy and Saint-Aignan. Both replied that they awaited only his orders, and that they were ready to begin; but fine weather and a favorable night were necessary for these to be carried out.

The King opened his window; the gold of the sun's rays showed along the horizon through the openings of the wood, and the moon white as snow was already outlined against the sky.

Not a ripple stirred on the surface of the green waters; the swans themselves, resting on their folded wings like ships at anchor, seemed filled with the warmth of the air, the freshness of the water, and the silence of the perfect evening.

Having seen all these things and contemplated the beautiful picture, the King gave the order for which M. de Villeroy and M. de Saint-Aignan had been waiting.

But to ensure that this order might be executed in a royal manner, one final question was necessary. Louis XIV. put it to the two gentlemen.

It contained these four words: "Have you any money?"

"Sire," replied Saint-Aignan, "we have arranged everything with M. Colbert."

"Ah! very good."

"Yes, Sire, and M. Colbert said he would be with your Majesty so soon as your Majesty showed any intention of carrying out the fêtes, the programme of which he has planned."

"Let him come, then."

At once, as if he had been listening at the door to keep up with the conversation, Colbert entered the room.

"Ah! M. Colbert," said his Majesty. "To your posts, gentlemen."

Saint-Aignan and Villeroy took their leave.

The King seated himself in an armchair near the window.

"I am to dance this evening in the ballet, M. Colbert," said he.

"In that case I shall pay the bills to-morrow."

"Why so?"

"I promised the trades-people to settle their accounts the day after the ballet took place."

"Very well, M. Colbert, since you promised to pay, pay."

"Well, Sire, but to pay, as M. de Lesdiguières said, one must have money."

"What! have not the four millions promised by M. Fouquet been sent? I forgot to ask you about it."

"Sire, they were with your Majesty at the time promised."

"Well?"

"Well, Sire, the colored lamps, the illuminations, the violins, and the cooks have consumed four millions in a week."

"Entirely?"

"To the last sou. Every time your Majesty directed the banks of the grand canal to be illuminated, it took as much oil as there was water in the basins."

"Well, well, M. Colbert, the fact is you have no more money."

"I have no more, but M. Fouquet has."

And Colbert's face lighted with sinister joy.

"What do you mean?" asked Louis.

"Sire, we have already made M. Fouquet advance six millions. He gave them with too much grace not to give others if need be. We do need them to-day; therefore he must act."

The King frowned.

"M. Colbert," said he, emphasizing the name of the financier, "that is not the way I understand it; I do not wish to use against one of my servants any means of pressure which might trouble him and fetter his service. M. Fouquet has given six millions in a week; that is a goodly sum."

Colbert turned pale.

"And yet," said he, "your Majesty did not speak in this way a short time ago — when the news of Belle-Isle arrived, for instance."

"You are right, M. Colbert."

"Nothing has changed, however, since then ; rather the contrary."

"In my mind, monsieur, everything is changed."

"What, Sire, does not your Majesty believe in the attempts?"

"My affairs concern me, monsieur, and I have already told you that I look after them myself."

"Then I see that I have had the misfortune," said Colbert, trembling with rage and fear, "to fall into disgrace with your Majesty."

"Not at all; on the contrary, you are very agreeable to me."

"Yet, Sire," said the minister, with that bluntness which was so clever and efficacious when it was a question of flattering Louis' pride, "of what use is it to be agreeable to your Majesty if one is no longer of use to him?"

"I shall reserve your services for a better occasion, and believe me, they will be worth only the more."

"So your Majesty's plan in this affair is —"

"You need money, M. Colbert?"

"Seven hundred thousand livres, Sire."

"You will take them from my private treasury."

Colbert bowed.

"And," added Louis, "as it seems difficult for you — in spite of your economy — to defray, with so limited a sum, the expenses which I wish to incur, I shall sign for you an order for three millions."

The King took a pen and at once signed an order. Then handing the paper to Colbert:

"Be easy," said he, "the plan which I have adopted is a kingly one, M. Colbert."

With these words, uttered with all the dignity which the young prince knew how to assume in such circumstances, he dismissed Colbert to give an audience to the tailors.

The order given by the King was known throughout the whole of Fontainebleau; it was known already that the King was trying on his costume, and that the ballet would be danced that evening. This news ran with the rapidity of lightning, and on the way kindled every kind of coquetry, desire, and wild ambition.

At the same moment, as if by enchantment, every one who

knew how to hold a needle, every one who could distinguish a doublet from a trunk, as Molière says, was summoned to help courtiers and ladies.

The King had finished his toilet by nine o'clock ; he appeared in his open carriage, which was decorated with branches and flowers.

The queens had taken their places on a magnificent dais erected on the borders of the lake in a theatre of marvellous construction.

In five hours the carpenters had put together all the different parts of the building ; the upholsterers had laid the carpets, erected the seats, and as if at the wave of an enchanter's wand, a thousand arms, aiding one another instead of interfering, had erected the structure in this place, amidst the sound of music ; while already the workmen were lighting the theatre and the shores of the lake with an incalculable number of lamps.

Since the sky set with stars had not a cloud, since not a breath of air was heard in the great woods, as if Nature had accommodated herself to the King's fancy, the back of the theatre had been left open ; so that behind the foreground of the scenes could be seen as a background the beautiful sky, twinkling with stars ; the sheet of water, encircled within the lights which were reflected in it, and the bluish outlines of the great clumps of woods with their rounded tops.

When the King appeared, the entire room was filled and presented a mass glittering with gold and precious stones ; in which, however, at first glance, no one face could be distinguished. By degrees, as the eye grew accustomed to such brilliancy, the rarest beauties appeared, as in the evening sky the stars, one by one, are seen by him who has closed his eyes and then opens them.

The theatre represented a grove ; some fauns lifting their cloven feet were jumping about here and there ; a dryad appeared and excited them to pursuit ; others joined her to protect her ; and they quarrelled as they danced. Suddenly, to restore order and peace, Spring and all his court appeared on the scene.

The Elements, subaltern powers of mythology with their attributes, hastened after their gracious sovereign.

The Seasons, allies of Spring, came to his side to form a quadrille, which, after some remarks more or less flattering,

was the beginning of the dance. The music of hautboys, flutes, and viols, described rural pleasures.

The King had already entered amidst thundering applause. He was dressed in a tunic of flowers, which instead of making him heavy looking, set off his slender and well-formed figure. His legs, the best shaped at court, appeared to advantage in flesh-colored silken hose so fine and so transparent that they seemed like the flesh itself. The most beautiful pale lilac satin shoes, with bows of flowers and leaves, imprisoned his small feet.

The upper part of his figure was in harmony with the rest: beautiful waving hair, an air of freshness enhanced by the brilliancy of his fine blue eyes which softly kindled all hearts, a mouth with tempting lips, which deigned to open in smiles. Such was the prince of that year, justly styled that evening, "The King of all the Loves."

There was in his gait something of the buoyant majesty of a god. He did not dance, he seemed to soar. His entrance produced the most brilliant effect. Suddenly the Comte de Saint-Aignan was seen trying to approach Louis or Madame.

The princess, attired in a long robe, diaphanous and light as the finest network made by the skilful Mechlin workers, one knee occasionally outlined beneath the folds of her tunic, her little feet clad in silken slippers, advanced radiant with her chorus of Bacchantes, and had already reached the place assigned to her in the dance.

The applause lasted so long that the count had ample leisure to join the King, who had paused.

"What is it, Saint-Aignan?" said Spring.

"Alas, Sire!" replied the courtier, quite pale, "your Majesty has not thought of the dance of the Fruits."

"Yes, it is omitted."

"No, Sire. Your Majesty did not give such orders, and the music has been retained."

"What a pity!" murmured the King. "The figure cannot be performed, since M. de Guiche is absent. It must be left out."

"Oh, Sire, a quarter of an hour of music without any dancing will ruin the ballet."

"But, count —"

"And Sire, that is not the greatest misfortune; for, after

all, the orchestra could just as well cut it out if necessary, but —

"But what?"

"M. de Guiche is here."

"Here?" said the King, frowning; "here? Are you sure?"

"And all dressed for the ballet, too, Sire."

The King felt the blood rise to his face.

"You must be mistaken," said he.

"So nearly correct, Sire, that if your Majesty will look to the right you will see the count waiting."

Louis turned quickly in the direction indicated, and there at his right, sparkling with beauty in his costume of Autumn, De Guiche was waiting for the King to look in order that he might address him.

To describe the stupefaction of Louis, that of Monsieur, who was growing anxious in his box, to tell of the whisperings, the moving of the heads in the hall, the strange emotion of Madame at sight of her partner, is a task we must leave to cleverer hands than ours.

The King stood with parted lips looking at the count. The latter approached, and bowed respectfully, saying:

"Sire, your Majesty's very humble servant has come to do you a service to-day as he has done at other times on the field of battle. By omitting the dance of the Fruits your Majesty would lose the most beautiful scene of the ballet. I did not want to be the cause of such a disaster to the beauty, the skill, and the grace of the King, so I left my estates in order to help my prince."

Every word fell distinctly, harmonious, eloquent, upon Louis XIV.'s ear. The flattery pleased him as much as the man's courage had surprised him. He replied simply:

"I did not bid you return, count."

"Certainly not, Sire, but your Majesty did not tell me to remain away."

The King felt the time was slipping by. To prolong the scene might ruin everything. A single shadow on the picture would spoil it beyond repair.

Moreover, the King's heart was filled with kindness. He had just drawn fresh inspiration from the eloquent eyes of Madame.

Henrietta's glance had said to him:

"Since he is jealous of you, divide the suspicions; the one who distrusts two rivals distrusts none."

With such a clever diversion Madame had decided him.

The King smiled at De Guiche. The latter understood not one word of Madame's dumb language, but he clearly saw that she affected not to look at him. The pardon he had obtained he attributed to the princess's kindness of heart. The King seemed pleased with every one.

Monsieur alone did not understand.

The ballet began; it was splendid. When the violins, by their bursts of melody, carried away the illustrious dancers, when the simple pantomime of that age, still simpler by the mediocre acting of the august actors, had reached its climax of triumph, the hall almost gave way beneath the applause.

De Guiche shone like a sun, but like a court sun which takes a second place.

Disdainful of his success, for which Madame showed him no acknowledgment, he thought only of boldly winning back the marked preference of the princess.

She had not given him a single glance. By degrees all his joy, all his brilliancy, were lost in grief and anxiety, so that his limbs became weak, his arms heavy, and his head drooped. From that moment the King was really the chief dancer in the quadrille.

He threw a side glance at his vanquished rival.

De Guiche was no longer even a courtier; without applause he danced poorly, and soon he could not dance at all.

The King and Madame had triumphed.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE NYMPHS OF THE PARK OF FONTAINEBLEAU.

THE King remained for a moment to enjoy his triumph, which, as we have said, was as complete as possible. Then he turned towards Madame in order to admire her a little.

Young people love perhaps with more vivacity, more ardor, more passion than people of a riper age; but at the same time they have all other feelings developed in proportion to their youth and vigor; so that vanity being almost always with them

the equivalent of love, the latter feeling according to the law of equivoise never attains that degree of perfection which it acquires in men and women of from thirty to thirty-five years of age.

Louis thought then of Madame, but only after he had carefully thought of himself; and Madame thought a great deal about herself without thinking in the least of the King.

But the victim of all this royal vanity and love was De Guiche.

Every one could notice the agitation and the prostration of the poor gentleman, and this prostration was especially the more noticeable since people were not accustomed to seeing his arms hanging down, his head heavy, his eyes devoid of brightness. They were not usually troubled about him when a question of elegance or of taste arose.

So De Guiche's depression was attributed by the greater number to his skill as courtier.

But there were others — there are always keen-sighted observers at court — who remarked his pallor and dejection, which he could neither dissemble nor hide, and they reasonably concluded that De Guiche was not acting the part of flatterer.

These sufferings, successes, and comments were blended, confounded, and lost in the uproar of applause.

But when the queens had expressed their satisfaction, and the spectators their enthusiasm; when the King had returned to his room to change his costume, and while Monsieur, dressed as a woman according to his custom, was dancing in his turn, De Guiche, who had recovered himself, approached Madame. She was seated at the back of the theatre waiting for the second part, and had created a sort of solitude in the midst of a crowd as if to meditate beforehand on choregraphical effects.

Absorbed thus deeply, it will be easily understood that she did not see, or that she pretended not to see, what was going on around her.

Finding her alone near a thicket of painted canvas, De Guiche approached Madame. Two of her maids of honor, dressed as hamadryads, seeing De Guiche approach, drew back out of respect. De Guiche advanced to the middle of the circle, and saluted her royal Highness.

But whether or not she noticed the salute, her royal Highness did not even turn her head.

A shiver passed through the unhappy man; he was not expecting such utter indifference; he had seen nothing, he had heard nothing, and consequently could guess nothing.

Seeing that his salutation met with no response, he advanced one step farther, and in a voice which he strove, though in vain, to render calm, said:

"I have the honor to present my most humble respects to Madame."

This time her royal Highness deigned to turn her languishing eyes upon the count.

"Ah, M. de Guiche," said she, "is it you? How do you do?" Then she turned away again.

The count's patience almost forsook him.

"Your royal Highness danced most charmingly just now," said he.

"You think so?" said Madame, carelessly.

"Yes. The character which your royal Highness assumes is in perfect harmony with your own."

Madame turned completely around, and looking at De Guiche with a bright and steady gaze said:

"Indeed?"

"Yes."

"Pray explain."

"You represent a divinity beautiful, scornful, and fickle," said he.

"You mean Pomona, M. le Comte?"

"I allude to the goddess your royal Highness represents."

Madame remained for a moment with lips compressed.

"But you yourself, monsieur," said she; "are not you an excellent dancer?"

"Oh, I, Madame, am one of those who are never noticed, and who are forgotten if by chance they have been noticed."

At these words, accompanied by one of those deep sighs which affect the inmost fibres of one's being, with heart full of anguish and throbbing fast, his head on fire, his eyes wandering, he bowed and withdrew behind the thicket.

For all reply Madame slightly shrugged her shoulders.

And as her maids of honor had withdrawn discreetly during the conversation, she now recalled them by a glance.

They were Mesdemoiselles de Tonnay-Charente and de Montalais.

At the sign from Madame both hastily approached.

"I'd you hear, mesdemoiselles?" asked the princess.

"What, Madame?"

"What M. de Guiche said?"

"No."

"Really, it is very remarkable," continued the princess in a tone of compassion, "how exile has affected the poor man's mind."

And then in a louder tone, fearing that the unhappy man might lose a word:

"In the first place he danced badly, and afterwards he made some very foolish speeches."

Whereupon she arose, humming the air to which she was about to dance.

De Guiche had overheard everything. The arrow had pierced to the very depths of his heart, and had wounded it sorely.

Then at the risk of interrupting the progress of the fête by his anger he fled, tearing into shreds his beautiful costume of Autumn, and strewing the way with vines, mulberry branches, almond leaves, and all the little artificial attributes of his assumed character.

A quarter of an hour afterwards he returned to the theatre. But it was easy to see that it was only by a powerful effort of reason or madness that he was enabled to go back; or, perhaps, — for the heart is thus made, — it was the impossibility of remaining longer away from her who had broken his heart.

Madame had finished her dance.

She saw him, but did not look at him, and he, irritated, furious, turned his back upon her as she passed escorted by her nymphs, and followed by a hundred flatterers.

Meanwhile at the other end of the theatre near the lake a woman was seated, her eyes fixed on one of the windows of the theatre from which issued streams of light.

This window was that of the royal box.

On leaving the theatre for the purpose of seeking the air he so much needed, De Guiche passed close to this woman and saluted her.

When she perceived the young man she arose like a woman surprised in the midst of thoughts which she was trying to hide from herself.

De Guiche recognized her, and stopped.

"Good evening, mademoiselle," said he, quickly.

"Good evening, M. le Comte."

"Ah, Mademoiselle de la Vallière," continued De Guiche, "how happy I am to meet you!"

"And I too, M. le Comte, am glad of this chance," said the young girl, making a movement as if to retire.

"Oh, no, no, do not leave me," said De Guiche, extending his hand towards her; "for by that you would give the lie to the kind words you have just spoken. Stay, I beg you; it is a most beautiful night. You are fleeing from the noise, are you? You love your own society! Well, I can understand that. All women who have hearts are like that. Nor do we ever see one who is bored when away from all the noisy pleasures. Oh, mademoiselle! mademoiselle!"

"What is the matter, monsieur?" asked La Vallière anxiously. "You seem agitated."

"I? Oh, no! no!"

"Then, M. de Guiche, allow me now to return you the thanks I had intended offering you at my first opportunity. It is to your recommendation, I know, that I owe my admission among Madame's maids of honor."

"Ah! yes, indeed. I remember about 't, and I congratulate myself. Do you love any one, mademoiselle?"

"I?"

"Oh, forgive me. I don't know what I am saying. A thousand pardons! Madame was right, quite right. This brutal exile has completely upset my mind."

"But it seems to me the King received you very kindly, monsieur."

"Do you think so? — received me kindly? — perhaps — yes —"

"Yes, received you kindly; for as a matter of fact you returned without his permission."

"That is true and I think you are right, mademoiselle. But have you seen the Vicomte de Bragelonne around here?"

La Vallière started at the name.

"Why do you ask?" said she.

"Oh, great heavens! Have I wounded you again?" said De Guiche. "In that case I am very unhappy and much to be pitied."

"Yes, very unhappy, much to be pitied, M. de Guiche, for you seem to be suffering horribly."

"Oh, mademoiselle, why have I not a devoted sister, a true friend?"

"You have friends, M. de Guiche, and the Vicomte de Bragelonne, of whom you spoke just now, is, it seems to me, one of the best."

"Yes, yes, indeed! He is one of my best friends. Farewell, mademoiselle, farewell. Receive all my thanks."

And he fled like a madman along the shore of the lake. His black shadow glided on, growing longer among the illuminated yew trees and the broad undulations of the water.

La Vallière looked after him some time in pity.

"Oh, yes, yes!" said she, "he is suffering and I begin to understand why."

Scarcely had she finished speaking when her companions, Mademoiselle de Montalais and Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente, ran towards her. They had finished their duties, laid aside their costumes of nymphs, and, delighted with the beautiful night and the success of the evening, had returned to find their companion.

"What, here already?" they exclaimed. "We thought we should be the first to arrive."

"I have been here for fifteen minutes," replied La Vallière.

"Did not the dance amuse you?"

"No."

"Nor the play?"

"No. So far as the scenery is concerned, I much prefer that of these dark woods in the depths of which shines here and there a light passing by like a red light, now open, now closed."

"This La Vallière is a poet," said Tonnay-Charente.

"That is to say, insupportable," said Montalais. "Every time that it is a question of laughing a little, or of amusing ourselves, La Vallière cries; every time that it is a question of crying when we have lost our clothes, or when our pride is hurt, or our costume is unbecoming, La Vallière laughs."

"Oh, as for me, I'm not like that," said Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente. "I'm a woman, and a woman such as few are. Whoever loves me flatters me; whoever flatters me pleases me, and whoever pleases me —"

"Well, you do not finish," said Montalais.

"It is too difficult," replied Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente, bursting into laughter. "Finish for me, you who are so clever."

"You, Louise," said Montalais, "does any one please you?"

"That concerns nobody," said the young girl, rising from the mossy bank on which she had been seated during the performance of the ballet.

"Now, mesdemoiselles, we have decided to amuse ourselves to-night without chaperone or escort. There are three of us, we like one another, and the night is glorious. Look over there and see the moon which is rising gently in the sky, silvering the tops of the chestnuts and the oaks. Oh, beautiful walk! beautiful liberty! the soft grass of the woods! the pleasure which your friendship gives me! Let us walk arm in arm to those great trees. Every one at this moment is seated at table and is very busy — busy getting ready for a formal promenade. Horses are being saddled or harnessed — the Queen's mules or Madame's four white ponies. We shall quickly reach a spot where no eye can see us, to which no step can follow us. Do you remember, Montalais, the woods of Chaverny and of Chambord, the numberless poplars of Blois where we exchanged our hopes?"

"And confidences, too."

"Yes."

"I think a good deal also," said Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente, "but I take care —"

"She says nothing," observed Montalais, "so that Athena alone knows what Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente thinks."

"Hark!" cried Mademoiselle de la Vallière, "I hear steps on this side."

"Quick! quick! into the reeds!" said Montalais. "Stoop lower, Athena, you are so tall."

Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente crouched down obediently, and almost at the same moment they saw two gentlemen approaching, their heads bent, their arms interlocked, coming towards them over the fine gravel walk which ran parallel to the bank.

The young girls made themselves small, invisible.

"It is M. de Guiche!" whispered Montalais to Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente.

"It is M. de Bragelonne!" said the latter to La Vallière.

The two young men continued to approach, conversing in animated tones.

"She was here just now," said the count. "If I had only

seen her I should say that it was an apparition, but I spoke to her."

"You are sure?"

"Yes; but perhaps I frightened her."

"How so?"

"Oh, my God! I was still crazy — you know why — so that she could have understood nothing of what I said and must have been alarmed."

"Oh," said Bragelonne, "do not be troubled, my friend. She is kind, and will excuse you; she is intelligent, and will understand."

"Yes; but if she understood and understood too well —"

"Well?"

"She will talk."

"Oh, you do not know Louise, count," said Raoul. "Louise has every virtue and not a single fault."

The two young men passed on, their voices becoming fainter and fainter.

"How is it, La Vallière," said Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente, "that the Vicomte de Bragelonne spoke of you as Louise?"

"We were brought up together," replied Mademoiselle de la Vallière, "and knew each other as children."

"And then M. de Bragelonne is betrothed to you, every one knows that."

"Oh, I did not know it. Is it true, mademoiselle?"

"Why," said Louise, blushing, "the fact is that M. de Bragelonne did me the honor to ask my hand in marriage, but —"

"But what?"

"It appears that the King —"

"Well?"

"That the King will not consent to our marriage."

"The King! What has he to do with it?" exclaimed Aure sharply. "Great heavens! Has the King any right to meddle with such things? 'Politics are politics,' as M. de Mazarin used to say, 'but love is love.' So if you love M. de Bragelonne and he loves you, marry him, I will give my consent."

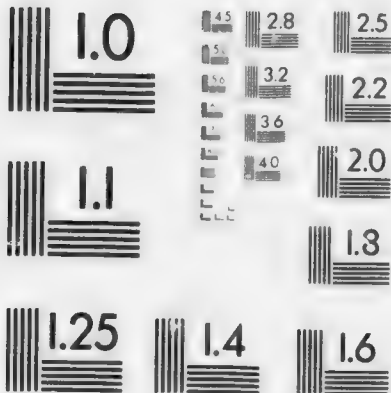
Athenais began to laugh.

"Oh, I am speaking seriously," replied Montalais, "and I think my advice in this case is just as good as the King's. Is it not, Louise?"



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"Come," said La Vallière, "the gentlemen have gone. Let us take advantage of the solitude to cross the open ground and reach the woods."

"The more so," said Athena, "as there are lights starting from the château and the theatre which seem to me to be preceding some person of distinction."

"Let us run, then," said all three.

And gracefully holding up the long folds of their silken skirts they lightly crossed the open space which lay between the lake and the thickest part of the park.

Montalais, swift as a deer, Athénaïs, eager as a young wolf, bounded through the dry grass; and occasionally some bold Actæon might have perceived in the dim light their shapely white limbs outlined under the heavy folds of their satin petticoats.

La Vallière, more delicate and more modest, let her skirts float around her; retarded also by her lame foot, she soon asked patience of her companions and, left behind, she compelled them to wait.

Just then a man, hidden in a ditch filled with young willow shoots, sprang quickly up its side and ran off in the direction of the château.

The three young women reached the outskirts of the park, every lane of which was well known to them. Long paths lined with flowers bordered the ditches, thick hedges protected on the one side pedestrians against the invasion of horses and vehicles.

Suddenly there was heard in the distance on the hard road the sound of the Queen's and of Madame's carriages. Several cavaliers were following them with the tramp of horses so well imitated in the musical lines of Virgil.

Some distant musicians answered the noise, and when the notes had died away, the nightingale, proud singer, sent forth to the company which he knew were gathered together in the woods his most complicated, softest, and most learned songs.

Near the singer against the dark background of the great trees shone the eyes of some owl attracted by the harmony.

Thus the fête of the whole court was also a fête for the mysterious hosts of the woods; for surely the deer was listening from the brake, the pheasant from his branch, the fox from his hole.

From the restless movements which took place among the foliage one could guess the life led by the invisible population of the night.

Then the nymphs of the wood gave forth little cries, but instantly reassured, they laughed and resumed their walk.

Thus they reached the royal oak, the venerable remains of one which in its youth had listened to the sighs of Henri II. for the beautiful Diana of Poitiers, and later those of Henri IV. for the lovely Gabrielle d'Estrées. Beneath this oak the gardeners had collected moss and turf in such a manner that never had seat more delightfully rested the wearied limbs of a monarch. The trunk of the tree formed a rough back, wide enough for four people.

Under the branches which stretched obliquely from the tree the girls' voices were lost as they rose to the sky.

CHAPTER XXII.

WHAT WAS SAID UNDER THE ROYAL OAK.

In the softness of the air and the silence of the foliage there was for these young girls an impulse to change their gay conversation suddenly to one of a more serious nature.

She indeed whose temperament was liveliest, Montalais, was the first to succumb. She began by heaving a deep sigh.

"What joy," said she, "to be here, free, alone, and with every right to be frank, especially towards ourselves!"

"Yes," said Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente, "for the court, however brilliant it may be, always hides some falsehood under its folds of velvet, or beneath the glitter of its diamonds."

"I never lie," replied La Vallière; "when I cannot tell the truth I keep still."

"You will not remain long in favor, my dear," said Montalais; "it is not here as it was at Blois, where we used to tell the dowager Madame all our troubles and longings. Madame had days when she remembered she was once young. On those days whoever talked with Madame found a true friend. Madame would tell us her love affairs with Monsieur, and we

would tell her of her love affairs with others, or of the reports of them that we had heard. Poor woman! so innocent! she would laugh at them as we did. Where is she now?"

"Ah, Montalais, laughing Montalais!" cried La Vallière, "there you are, sighing again; the woods inspire you, and you are almost reasonable this evening."

"Girls," said Athenais, "you ought not to regret the court of Blois so much unless you are not happy with us. A court is the place where men and women gather to discuss matters which mothers and tutors and especially confessors severely forbid. At court things are said because allowed by the King and the queens. Is it not fun?"

"Oh, Athenais!" said Louise, blushing.

"Athenais is frank to-night," said Montalais, "let us make the most of it."

"Yes, indeed, for to-night any one could discover the most intimate secrets of my heart."

"Ah, if M. de Montespan were in earshot!" said Montalais.

"Do you think I am in love with M. de Montespan?" murmured the beautiful young girl.

"He is handsome, I suppose?"

"Yes, and that is no small advantage in my eyes."

"You see, now!"

"I will say more: he of all the men here is the handsomest and the —"

"What was that?" said La Vallière, starting up suddenly from the mossy bank.

"Some deer fleeing among the trees."

"I am afraid only of men," said Athenais.

"When they do not resemble M. de Montespan?"

"A truce to raillery. M. de Montespan is attentive to me, but that does not mean anything. Is not M. de Guiche here attentive to Madame?"

"Poor fellow!" said La Vallière.

"Why poor? Madame is beautiful enough and royal enough, I should think."

La Vallière shook her head sadly.

"When one loves," said she, "it is neither beauty nor rank; my dear friends, when one loves, it should be the heart and the eyes only of him or her whom one loves."

Montalais began to laugh loudly.

"Heart! eyes! oh, sugar-plums!" said she.

"I speak for myself," replied La Vallière.

"Noble sentiments!" said Athenais, coldly, but with a protesting air.

"Do you not have them?" said Louise.

"Certainly; but to continue. How can one pity a man who is attentive to a woman like Madame? If there is any advantage, it is on the count's side."

"Oh, no," said La Vallière, "it is on Madame's side."

"Explain yourself."

"I will. Madame has not the slightest desire to know what love is. She plays with it as children do with fireworks, one spark of which might set a palace on fire. It burns, and that is all she needs. Now joy and love are the tissue of which she wants her life to be woven. M. de Guiche loves this illustrious lady, but she will never love him."

Athenais burst into a disdainful laugh.

"Do people really love?" said she. "Where are your noble sentiments of a moment ago? Does not a woman's virtue lie in the courageous refusal of every intrigue? A well-balanced woman gifted with a kind heart ought to look at men, make herself loved by them, and even adored, and say at the most, once in her life: 'Wait, it seems to me that had I not been as I am, I would have hated this one less than the others.'"

"Then," cried La Vallière, clasping her hands, "that is what you have in store for M. de Montespan?"

"Certainly; for him as well as for any one else. What! I have told you that I recognize in him a certain superiority, and that is not enough! My dear, one is a woman, that is, a queen, so long as Nature lets her hold that royalty, — from the age of fifteen to thirty-five. We are at liberty to have a heart later when we shall have only that."

"Oh, oh!" murmured La Vallière.

"Perfect!" cried Montalais, "a fine woman! Athenais, you will get on in the world!"

"Do you not approve of me?"

"From your hands to your feet," said her laughing friend.

"You are joking, are you not, Montalais?" asked Louise.

"No, I approve of everything Athenais has just said; but —"

"But what?"

"Well, I cannot put it into practice. I have the strongest principles; I make resolutions, before which the laws of the

Stadtholder and those of the King of Spain are child's play, but when the day comes to carry them out, I can do nothing."

"You weaken?" asked Athenaïs, in disdain.

"Shamefully."

"Unfortunate nature," said Athenaïs. "But at least you make a choice?"

"Why, no! Fate delights in thwarting me in everything. I dream of emperors and I find —"

"Aure! Aure!" exclaimed La Vallière, "for pity's sake, do not, for the pleasure of saying something witty, sacrifice those who love you so devotedly."

"Oh, as for that, I trouble myself very little. Those who love me are glad enough that I do not send them away, my dear. So much the worse for me if I am weak; but so much the worse for them if I avenge myself on them!"

"Aure!"

"You are right," said Athenaïs, "and perhaps you too will reach the same goal. That is called being a coquette. You see, young ladies, men who are silly in many things are especially so in that they confound under the term 'coquetry' a woman's pride and her fickleness. I am proud, that is, impregnable; I am harsh to my suitors, but I do not make any pretence of retaining them. Men say that I am a coquette, because they are vain enough to think that I want them. Other women, Montalais, for instance, have let themselves be influenced by flattery; they would be lost were it not for that fortunate resort of instinct which urges them to change suddenly and punish the one whose homage they lately accepted."

"A learned dissertation!" said Montalais, in a tone of thorough enjoyment.

"Odious!" murmured Louise.

"Thanks to this coquetry, for that is genuine coquetry," continued Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente, "the lover, who was puffed up with pride a moment ago, a moment later is suffering in every pore of his pride. He was already beginning to assume the airs of a conqueror — now he retreats; he was about to protect — now he again prostrates himself. The result is that instead of having a jealous, troublesome husband, we have a lover always trembling, always fascinated, always submissive, and for the simple reason that he finds an ever new wife. There, young ladies, now be convinced of the advantages of coquetry. It is by that that one is queen among women,

when one has not received from God the precious faculty of holding one's heart and mind in check."

"Oh, how clever you are!" said Montalais, "and how thoroughly you understand the duty of women!"

"I am arranging a special case of happiness," said Athenais modestly. "I am defending myself like all other weak but loving natures against the oppression of the stronger."

"La Vallière does not say a word."

"Does she not approve of us?"

"I simply do not understand you," said Louise; "you speak like beings who are not called to live on this earth."

"And it is a pretty earth too!" said Montalais.

"An earth," said Athenais, "in which man burns incense before woman in order to make her fall down overcome; in which he insults her when she has fallen."

"Who spoke to you of falling?" asked Louise.

"Ah, yours is a new theory, my dear; tell me if you please your means of keeping from being conquered if you give in to love?"

"Oh," cried the young girl, raising to the dark heavens her beautiful eyes, now filled with tears, "oh, if you knew what a heart was, I could explain to you and convince you; a loving heart is stronger than all your coquetry and your pride. Never is a woman loved, I think, and God understands me — never does a man love passionately unless he feels he is loved in return. Leave to old men the farce of believing themselves loved by coquettes. A young man understands them and does not deceive himself. If he feels any desire for a coquette, any fancy, any passion — you see that I give you a free and fair field — the coquette may drive him out of his senses, but never will she inspire love. Love, you see, as I conceive of it, is a sacrifice, constant, absolute, complete; but it is not a sacrifice on the part of one alone. It is the complete giving up of two souls who wish to blend into one. If ever I love, I shall beg my lover to leave me free and pure; I shall say to him — what he will understand — that my heart is torn by the refusal I make; and he will love me, realizing the pitiful greatness of my sacrifice; in his turn he will be as devoted as I am; he will respect me, and will not try to make me fall in order to insult me when I have fallen, as just now you said would be done, when you blasphemed against the love that I understand. That is how I love. Now tell me that my lover

will despise me; I defy him to do so, unless he be the vilest of men, and my heart is guarantee that I would make no such choice. My glance will pay him for his sacrifices, or will inspire him with virtues he never thought he had."

"But, Louise," cried Montalais, "you tell us that and yet you do not practise it."

"What do you mean?"

"You are adored by Raoul de Bragelonne, who worships you on both knees. The poor fellow is the victim of your virtue, as he would be — even more than he would be — of my coquetry or of the pride of Athenais."

"All this is simply a different form of coquetry," said Athenais, "and Louise, I see, practises it without knowing it."

"Oh!" said La Vallière.

"Yes; you may call it instinct, keenest sensibility, exquisite refinement of feeling, perpetual display of passionate outbreaks which never end. Oh, it is very artful and very effective. Now that I think of it I should even have preferred these tactics to my pride as a means of attacking men, because it has the advantage of sometimes convincing; but from now on, without wholly condemning myself, I declare it to be superior to the simple coquetry of Montalais."

The two young girls began to laugh. La Vallière alone was silent, and shook her head. Then after an instant:

"If you were to tell me one-quarter of what you have just said before a man," said she, "or were I even convinced that you believed it, I would die of shame and grief on the spot."

"Well, die, tender little one," replied Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente, "for if there are no men here, there are at least two women, your friends, who declare you to be attainted and convicted of being an instinctive coquette, an ingenuous coquette; that is the most dangerous kind in the world."

"Oh, girls!" replied La Vallière, blushing and ready to cry.

The two others again burst out laughing.

"Well, I shall ask Bragelonne."

"Bragelonne?" said Athenais.

"Yes; he is as courageous as Cæsar, as clever and witty as M. Fouquet; poor fellow, for twelve years he has known you, loved you, and yet — if one must believe it — he has never so much as kissed the tips of your fingers."

"Explain this cruelty, you woman of feeling," said Athenais to La Vallière.

"I can explain it in a single word: virtue. Do you deny the existence of virtue?"

"Come, Louise, do not prevaricate," said Aure, taking her hand.

"But what do you want me to tell you?" cried La Vallière.

"What you will. But you will talk in vain, for I shall persist in my opinion of you. An instinctive coquette, an ingenuous coquette, I repeat, which is the most dangerous of all."

"Oh, no! no! For pity's sake, do not think that!"

"What! Twelve years of absolute severity!"

"Oh, twelve years ago I was only five. A child's frivolity cannot be counted against a young girl."

"Well, now you are seventeen; three years instead of twelve. For three years you have been constantly and wholly cruel. You have against you the silent woods of Blois, the meeting-places where one counts the stars, the nightly seances under the plantain trees, his twenty years speaking to your fourteen, the fire of his eyes speaking to you yourself."

"Yes, yes, but so it is!"

"Come, now; it is impossible!"

"But, for goodness sake, why?"

"Tell us something credible, my dear, and we will believe you."

"But suppose one thing?"

"What? Come, now."

"Go on, or we may imagine more than you wish."

"Suppose, then, that I thought myself in love and that I am not?"

"What! not in love?"

"What can you expect? If I have acted differently from others when they love, it is because I have not loved; it is because my time has not yet come."

"Louise! Louise!" said Montalais, "take care or I shall remind you of what you said just now. Raoul is not here; do not crush him while he is absent; be charitable, and if on looking more closely you think you do not love him, tell him so, poor fellow!"

And she began to laugh.

"Just now mademoiselle was pitying M. de Guiche," said

Athenais; "cannot the explanation of this indifference for the one be found in her compassion for the other?"

"Go on, mesdemoiselles," said La Vallière; "condemn me, since you do not understand me."

"Oh! oh!" replied Montalais, "temper, sorrow, tears; we are joking, Louise; we are not, I assure you, quite the monsters you think us. Look at Athenais the proud, as she is called; she does not love M. de Montespan, it is true, but she would be in despair if M. de Montespan did not love her. Look at me. I laugh at M. Malicorne, but, poor fellow, he well knows when he must raise my hand to his lips. And then the eldest of us is not twenty. What a future!"

"Foolish girls that you are!" murmured Louise.

"That is true," said Montalais, "and you alone have spoken words of wisdom."

"Certainly."

"Granted," replied Athenais. "So you really do not love this poor M. de Bragelonne?"

"Perhaps," said Montalais; "she is not yet quite sure. But in any case, listen, Athenais. If M. de Bragelonne becomes free, I will give you the advice of a friend."

"What is that?"

"To look at him well before deciding in favor of M. de Montespan."

"Oh, if you look at the matter in that light, my dear, M. de Bragelonne is not the only one at whom one finds pleasure in looking. For instance, M. de Guiche has his value also."

"He did not shine this evening," said Montalais, "and I know from good authority that Madame found him disagreeable."

"M. de Saint-Aignan was brilliant, and I am sure that more than one who saw him dance will not soon forget him. Is it not so, La Vallière?"

"Why do you ask me? I did not see him, nor do I know him."

"You did not see M. de Saint-Aignan? You do not know him?"

"No."

"Come, come! Do not pretend a virtue more affected than our pride. You have eyes, have you not?"

"Excellent ones."

"In that case you must have seen all our dancers this evening."

"Yes, nearly all."

"That 'nearly all' is very impertinent."

"I give it you for what it is."

"Well, come! Among 'nearly all' the gentlemen that you saw which do you prefer?"

"Yes," said Montalais. "Is it M. de Saint-Aignan, M. de Guiche, M. —"

"I prefer no one; I find them all exactly alike."

"There in all that brilliant assemblage in the midst of the chief court of the world no one pleased you?"

"I did not say that."

"Well, speak, then. Come, share your ideal with us."

"He is not an ideal."

"He exists, then?"

"Really," cried La Vallière, at her wits' end, "I do not understand what you mean. You have a heart like me and eyes like me, and yet you can speak of M. de Guiche, of M. de Saint-Aignan, of M. — I do not know who, when the King was there!"

These words, uttered hastily, in a troubled, fervent tone, elicited from the girl on each side of her an exclamation which filled her with fear.

"The King!" cried Montalais and Athenais at the same moment.

La Vallière let her head drop forward in her hands. "The King! the King!" she murmured. "Have you ever seen any one equal to the King?"

"You were right just now in saying that you had excellent eyes, Louise, for you see a great distance, too far, alas! The King is not of those at whom our poor eyes have a right to look."

"Oh, it is true! it is true!" cried La Vallière. "It is not given to all eyes to look at the sun, but I shall look at it even were I to become blind by so doing."

At that moment, as though caused by the words which had just escaped from La Vallière's lips, a rustling in the leaves and the swish of silk sounded behind the adjoining bushes. The young girls rose in fright; they distinctively saw the leaves move, but were unable to see the object which caused the disturbance.

"Oh, it is a wolf or a wild boar," cried Montalais. "Let us run!"

And the three young girls rose, a prey to an indescribable terror, and fled by the first path, not stopping till they had reached the edge of the woods.

There, out of breath, leaning against one another, feeling their hearts beating wildly, they strove to collect their senses, but succeeded only after several moments. Finally seeing lights in the direction of the château, they decided to go thither.

La Vallière was exhausted with fatigue. Aure and Athenais had to support her.

"Oh, we have had a narrow escape!" said Montalais.

"Girls," cried La Vallière, "I am afraid it was something worse than a wolf. As for me, — and I am saying exactly what I think, — I would a thousand times rather run the risk of being devoured by a wild beast than to have been overheard. Oh, fool, fool that I am, how could I have thought, how could I have dared to say such things!"

Thereupon her head drooped like that of a reed. She felt her limbs tremble; her strength failed her and she sank, almost lifeless, from the arms of her companions down on the grassy path.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE KING'S ANXIETY.

LET us leave poor La Vallière half unconscious in the arms of her companions and return to the vicinity of the royal oak.

The three young girls had gone scarcely twenty steps before the sound which had so terrified them increased among the branches. A figure more distinctly revealed as it parted the branches appeared on the edge of the woods, and seeing the place empty, burst out laughing.

It is useless to say that the figure was that of a young and handsome gentleman. He instantly signed to another, who appeared in his turn.

"Well, Sire," said the second, advancing timidly, "has your Majesty frightened away our young sentimentalists?"

"So it appears," said the King; "you may show yourself with perfect safety, Saint-Aignan."

"But, Sire, you will be recognized."

"But I tell you they have gone."

"That was a happy meeting, Sire, and if I dared give advice to your Majesty we ought to pursue them."

"They are far away."

"Bah! They would easily let themselves be overtaken, especially if they knew who were following them."

"How so, Monsieur Coxcomb?"

"The deuce! One of them found me to her liking and the other compared you to the sun."

"All the more reason for our keeping hidden, Saint-Aignan. The sun does not appear at night."

"Faith, Sire, your Majesty is not inquisitive. In your place I should like to know who these two nymphs are, these dryads, these hamadryads, who have so good an opinion of us."

"Oh, I shall recognize them easily enough without running after them, I warrant you."

"How so?"

"Gadzooks! By their voices. They belong to the court; and the one who spoke of me had a charming voice."

"Ah, there your Majesty is letting yourself be influenced by flattery."

"No one will ever say that you employ that means."

"Oh, pardon me, Sire. I am stupid, stupid!"

"Come, now, let us look where I told you."

"And this passion which you confided to me, Sire; is it already forgotten?"

"No, indeed. How could you expect me to forget such eyes as Mademoiselle de la Vallière's?"

"Oh, the other has so charming a voice!"

"Which?"

"The one who loves the sun."

"M. de Saint-Aignan!"

"Pardon, Sire."

"Well, I am not sorry you should believe that I like sweet voices as well as beautiful eyes. I know you; you are a frightful talker, and to-morrow I shall pay for the confidence I have placed in you."

"How so?"

"I say that to-morrow every one will know that I have designs on this little La Vallière; but take care, Saint-Aignan, I have confided my secret to no one but you, and if any one

should speak to me about it I shall know who has betrayed my confidence."

"You are provoked, Sire!"

"No, but you understand I do not wish to compromise this poor girl."

"Sire, fear nothing."

"You promise me?"

"Sire, I give you my word."

"Good," thought the King, laughing to himself, "every one will know to-morrow that to-night I ran after La Vallière."

Then, endeavoring to see where he was:

"Why, we are lost!" said he.

"Oh, not seriously."

"Where does that gate lead to?"

"To Rond-Point, Sire."

"Where we were going when we heard the sound of women's voices?"

"Yes, Sire, and the end of a conversation in which I had the honor of hearing my name uttered by the side of your Majesty's."

"You return very often to that, Saint-Aignan."

"Your Majesty will forgive me, but I am delighted to know that there is a woman who is thinking of me, without my knowledge and without my having done anything towards helping it on. Your Majesty cannot comprehend this feeling of satisfaction, you whose rank and merit everywhere attract attention and compel love."

"Why, no, Saint-Aignan, believe me or not, as you please," said the King, leaning familiarly on Saint-Aignan's arm, and taking the road he thought would lead to the château, "but this innocent confidence, this wholly disinterested preference of a woman who perhaps will never attract my attention, — in a word, the mystery of this adventure excites me, and truly if I were not so taken with La Vallière —"

"Oh, do not let that hinder your Majesty; you have time before you."

"How so?"

"They say La Vallière is very prudish."

"You excite me, Saint-Aignan; I want to see her again. Come, come." The King was falsifying; nothing, on the contrary, could make him less anxious; but he had a rôle to play. He began to walk quickly; Saint-Aignan followed him, keep-



"HELP! HELP!" CRIED TWO VOICES.



ing at a slight distance. Suddenly the King stopped, and the courtier followed his example.

"Saint-Aignan," said he, "do you not hear moans?"

"I?"

"Yes; listen."

"Yes, and crying too, it seems to me."

"It is from this direction," said the King.

"It sounds like the tears, the sobs of a woman," said M. de Saint-Aignan.

"Let us hasten on!"

The King and the favorite, taking a cross path, hastened on through the grass.

As they advanced the crying grew more distinct.

"Help! help!" cried two voices.

The young men redoubled their speed. As they drew nearer the sighs became moans.

"Help! help!" was repeated.

Whereupon the King and his companion hurried on still more quickly.

Suddenly, on the other side of a ditch, beneath the drooping branches of some willows, they perceived a woman on her knees, holding another woman who had fainted. A few feet away stood a third in the middle of the road, calling for help.

On perceiving the two gentlemen, of whose rank she was ignorant, the shouts of the woman became louder than ever.

The King, who was ahead of his companion, leaped across the ditch and came upon the group at the very moment when from the end of the path which led in the direction of the château a dozen or more persons advanced, drawn by the same cries which had attracted the King and M. de Saint-Aignan.

"What is the matter, mesdemoiselles?" demanded Louis.

"The King!" cried Mademoiselle de Montalais, in her astonishment letting go of La Vallière's head, which fell back upon the grass.

"Yes, the King. But that is no reason for abandoning your companion. Who is she?"

"Mademoiselle de la Vallière, Sire."

"Mademoiselle de la Vallière?"

"She has just fainted."

"Ah!" cried the King, "poor child! Quick! quick! a surgeon!"

But notwithstanding the agitation with which he uttered

these words Louis had not such good control over himself but that they, as well as the gesture which accompanied them, appeared somewhat cold to M. de Saint-Aignan, to whom the King had confided the secret of the intense love with which he was inspired.

"Saint-Aignan," continued the King, "watch over Mademoiselle de la Vallière, I beg of you. Call a surgeon. I will go and inform Madame of the accident which has befallen her maid of honor."

And while M. de Saint-Aignan was engaged in carrying Mademoiselle de la Vallière to the château the King hastened forward, happy at finding this opportunity to see Madame and to be able to speak to her under a plausible pretext. Fortunately a carriage was passing, the coachman was ordered to stop, and those who were driving, hearing of the accident, hastened to give up their places to Mademoiselle de la Vallière.

The current of air caused by the rapid driving promptly restored the invalid to consciousness. Arrived at the château, although very weak, she was able to step out of the carriage, and with the assistance of Athenais and Montalais reached the inner apartments. They made her sit down in a room on the ground floor. Then, as the accident had not produced much effect on the promenaders, the walk was resumed.

Meanwhile the King had found Madame beneath a tree; he seated himself beside her, while his foot gently sought hers under her chair.

"Take care, Sire," said Henrietta in a low tone, "you do not seem like a man who is indifferent."

"Alas!" replied Louis XIV. in the same tone, "I greatly fear that we have made a compact beyond our strength."

Then aloud:

"Did you hear of the accident?"

"What accident?"

"Oh, forsooth, on seeing you I forgot that I came on purpose to tell you of it. However, I am painfully affected by it; one of your maids of honor, poor La Vallière, has just fainted."

"Ah, poor child!" said the princess, calmly, "what was the cause of it?"

Then in a low tone:

"But you do not remember, Sire; you are pretending to be in love with this girl, and yet you stay here while she may be dying elsewhere."

"Ah, Madame," said the King, sighing, "how much better you are in your rôle than I; how you think of everything!"

He arose.

"Madame," said he in a sufficiently loud tone to be heard by every one: "permit me to leave you; my anxiety is great; I am desirous of finding out for myself if suitable care has been given her."

And Louis XIV. left to return again to La Vallière, while all those who had been present commented upon the King's words, "my anxiety is great."

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE KING'S SECRET.

ON the way Louis meet the Comte de Saint-Aignan.

"Well, Saint-Aignan," he demanded, with affected concern, "how is the patient?"

"Why, Sire," stammered Saint-Aignan, "I confess to my shame that I do not know."

"You do not know?" said the King, pretending to take seriously this lack of interest in the object of his affection.

"Sire, pardon me, but I have just met one of our three dryads, and I admit that this distracted me."

"Ah, you found them," said the King, hastily.

"The one who deigned to speak so flatteringly of me. And having found mine, I was looking for yours, Sire, when I was fortunate enough to meet your Majesty."

"That is well; but Mademoiselle de la Vallière first of all," said the King, true to his part.

"How beautiful and interesting she is," said Saint-Aignan, "and how fortunate it was she fainted when she did, since your Majesty had been talking about her."

"And the name of your nymph, Saint-Aignan; is it a secret?"

"Sire, it ought to be a secret and a very great one even; but for you, your Majesty knows very well that there is no secret."

"Her name, then?"

"It is Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente."

"Is she beautiful?"

"Beyond conception, Sire, and I recognized the voice which pronounced my name so tenderly. I approached her, questioned her as much as I could in the midst of the crowd, and she told me without suspecting anything that a short time ago she and her two friends had been at the great oak when the sound of a wolf or a robber frightened them and made them run away."

"But," demanded the King, quickly, "what was the name of these two friends?"

"Sire," said Saint-Aignan, "your Majesty may send me to the Bastille."

"Why?"

"Because I am an egoist and a fool. My surprise was so great at such a conquest and at so fortunate a discovery that I stayed there. Besides I did not think that, preoccupied as you were with Mademoiselle de la Vallière, your Majesty would attach any great importance to what you had heard. Then Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente left me hurriedly to return to Mademoiselle de la Vallière."

"Well, let us hope I shall have an equal chance with you, Saint-Aignan."

"My King has ambition, I see, and he will let no conquest escape him. Well, I promise him that I shall search conscientiously, and besides, from one of the three Graces we can find out the names of the others, and with the name, the secret."

"Oh, I, too," said the King, "have only to hear her voice to recognize it. But let us quit talking and go to this poor La Vallière."

"Well," thought Saint-Aignan, "here, in truth, is a passion beginning to dawn, and for this young girl too; it is extraordinary; I never would have believed it."

Whereupon he showed the King the room to which La Vallière had been brought, and the King entered. Saint-Aignan followed him.

In a low room, before a window opening upon the lawns, sat La Vallière in a deep armchair, inhaling long draughts of the perfumed night air. From her loosened bodice the lace fell in tumbled folds, mingling with her beautiful blond curls, which lay in masses on her shoulders. Her languishing eyes, in which burned a dull fire, were filled with tears; she resembled one of those beautiful visions of our dreams which pass

pale and mystic before the closed eyes of the sleeper, opening their wings without moving them, their lips without uttering a sound.

The pearl-like pallor of La Vallière possessed a charm impossible to describe; mental and bodily suffering had given to her gentle features a noble expression of grief; the absolute passiveness of her arms and bust made her resemble one who has passed away rather than a living being. She seemed to hear neither the whisperings of her companions nor the distant murmurs which arose from the vicinity. She was talking to herself, and from time to time her slender, delicate hands trembled as if in contact with some invisible pressure. She did not see the King as he entered, so deeply was she absorbed in her reverie.

From a distance he saw her lovely face, on which the moon was shedding its pure silvery light.

"My God!" he cried, in involuntary fright, "she is dead!"

"No, Sire," said Montalais in a low tone, "on the contrary, she is better, are you not, Louise?"

La Vallière did not answer.

"Louise," continued Montalais, "the King deigns to be anxious about your health."

"The King!" cried Louise, suddenly starting up as if a stream of fire had darted from her limbs to her heart; "the King is anxious about me?"

"Yes," said Montalais.

"The King is here, then?" said La Vallière, not daring to look around.

"That voice! that voice!" said Louis quickly into Saint-Aignan's ear.

"Why, yes," replied Saint-Aignan, "your Majesty is right; she is the one who loves the sun."

"Hush!" said the King.

Then approaching La Vallière:

"You are ill, mademoiselle? Just now in the park I saw that you had fainted. How were you attacked?"

"Sire," stammered the poor child, pale and trembling, "really I cannot tell."

"You walked too far," said the King, "and perhaps fatigue —"

"No, Sire," replied Montalais, quickly answering for her

friend, "it could not have been fatigue, for we spent a part of the evening seated under the royal oak."

"The royal oak?" asked the King, with a start. "I was not deceived, then; it is indeed as I thought." And he glanced at the count with a knowing look.

"Oh, yes," said Saint-Aignan, "under the royal oak with Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente."

"How do you know that?" asked Montalais.

"Very easily; Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente told me of it."

"Then she must have told you the cause of La Vallière's fainting-fit also?"

"The deuce! she spoke to me of a wolf or of a robber, I do not remember which."

La Vallière listened with fixed eyes, her bosom heaving, as if she foresaw a part of the truth, thanks to her acute perception. Louis took her manner and nervousness for the effects of fright, from which she had only partly recovered.

"Fear nothing, mademoiselle," said he, with a dawn of an emotion he could not hide; "this wolf which caused you such fear was simply a wolf with two feet."

"A man! a man!" cried Louise. "Was there a man there listening?"

"Well, mademoiselle, what great wrong was there in having listened? Could you in your own opinion have said things which should not have been heard?"

La Vallière wrung her hands, and raised them quickly to her face, trying to hide her blushes.

"Oh," she asked, "in heaven's name, who was hidden? Who overheard?"

The King advanced to take one of her hands.

"It was I, mademoiselle," said he, bowing with gentle respect; "could I possibly inspire you with fear?"

La Vallière gave a great cry. Then a second time her strength left her, and cold, moaning, and in despair, she fell back unconscious in her chair.

The King had time to put out his arm, so that she was half sustained by him.

Two feet from them stood Mesdemoiselles de Tonnay-Charente and Montalais, who, motionless and petrified at the remembrance of their conversation with La Vallière, did not even think of helping her, restrained as they were by the pres-

ence of the King, who, with one knee on the floor, held La Vallière around the waist.

"And you overheard, Sire?" murmured Athenais.

But the King did not reply; his glance was fixed on the half-closed eyes of La Vallière; he held her lifeless hand in his own.

"By heaven!" replied Saint-Aignan, who hoped for his own sake that Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente would faint, and who advanced with open arms, "we did not lose one word."

But the haughty Athenais was not the woman to faint; she threw a terrible glance at Saint-Aignan and left the room.

Montalais, more courageous, went quickly to Louise, and received her from the arms of the King, who, on feeling his face covered by the perfumed tresses of the apparently dying girl, was beginning to lose his head.

"Good!" said Saint-Aignan; "this is an adventure, and it will be my fault if I am not the first to relate it."

Louis went to him with trembling voice and hand upraised.

"Count," said he, "not a word."

The poor King forgot that one hour before he had given the same warning to the same man, with an entirely opposite intention, as he then desired the man not to heed his words. And this second warning was as superfluous as the former.

Half an hour later all Fontainebleau knew that Mademoiselle de la Vallière had had a conversation with Montalais and Tonnay-Charente beneath the royal oak, and that in this conversation she had confessed her love for the King. It was known, also, that Louis after he had shown all the anxiety inspired by Mademoiselle de la Vallière's condition, had turned pale and had trembled at receiving the beautiful, unconscious girl in his arms. So that it was wholly decided among the courtiers that the greatest event of the period had just been revealed; that his Majesty loved Mademoiselle de la Vallière; and that consequently Monsieur could sleep in perfect peace.

This is what the queen mother, as surprised as the others at this sudden turn, hastened to tell the young Queen and Philippe d'Orléans. But in attacking them, she set to work in different manners. To her daughter-in-law, she said:

"See, Thérèse, how wrong you were to accuse the King; he is in love with some one else to-day. Why should there be any more truth in to-day's report than in yesterday's, or in yesterday's than to-day's?"

In relating to Monsieur the adventure of the royal oak she said: "Are you not absurd in your jealousy, my dear Philippe? It is said that the King has lost his heart to that little La Vallière. Do not speak of it to your wife; the Queen would soon know it."

This last confidence had its immediate result.

Monsieur, reassured, triumphantly sought his wife, and as it was not yet midnight, and as the fête was to last until two o'clock in the morning, he offered her his arm for the promenade. Then having taken a few steps, the first thing he did was to disobey his mother.

"Do not tell the Queen all that is said about the King," said he, mysteriously.

"What is said?" asked Madame.

"That my brother has suddenly become possessed of a strange passion."

"For whom?"

"For that little La Vallière."

It was dark and Madame could smile at her ease.

"Ah!" said she, "and how long has this been going on?"

"For several days, it seems. But it has only been smoking, and not until this evening did his love show itself."

"The King has good taste," said Madame. "And in my opinion the little girl is charming."

"You seem to be jesting, my dear."

"I! How so?"

"At any rate, this fancy will make one person happy, even if it is only La Vallière."

"But," continued the princess, "you speak, Monsieur, as if you had read deep in the heart of my maid of honor. Who told you that she returned the King's passion?"

"And who told you that she did not?"

"She loves the Vicomte de Bragelonne."

"Ah, you think so?"

"She is even betrothed to him."

"She was."

"What do you mean?"

"Why, when the King was asked for permission to conclude the marriage he refused it."

"Refused?"

"Yes, although it was to the Comte de la Fère himself, whom, as you know, the King honors with great esteem

on account of the part he played in the restoration of your brother and in several other affairs which happened some time ago."

"Well, the poor lovers must wait until it pleases the King to change his mind; they are young; there is plenty of time."

"Ah! my love," said Philippe, laughing in his turn, "I see that you do not know the best part of the story."

"No."

"The part which affects the King!"

"The King affected?"

"To his heart."

"But how? Tell me quickly! come."

"By a most romantic adventure."

"You know how much I love adventures, yet you make me wait," said the princess, impatiently.

"Well —"

Monsieur paused.

"I am listening."

"Beneath the royal oak — you know where that is?"

"No matter; beneath the royal oak, you say?"

"Well, thinking herself alone with two friends, Mademoiselle de la Vallière confided to them her love for the King."

"Ah!" said Madame, beginning to be uneasy, "her love for the King?"

"Yes."

"And when was this?"

"A short time ago."

Madame started.

"And no one knew of this love?"

"No one."

"Not even his Majesty?"

"Not even his Majesty. The little lady kept her secret strictly to herself, when suddenly it became too strong for her and escaped."

"And how did you hear this absurd tale?"

"Why, just as every one else did."

"From whom did every one else hear it?"

"From La Vallière herself, who confessed her love to her companions, Montalais and Tonnay-Charente."

Madame stopped and suddenly dropped her husband's hand.

"She made this avowal an hour ago?" asked Madame.

"About that time."

"Does the King know of it?"

"Why, that is just the point of the whole thing; the King was with Saint-Aignan behind the royal oak, and heard all this interesting conversation without losing a single word."

Madame felt wounded to the heart.

"But," said she, dully, "I have seen the King since and he did not tell me a single word of all this."

"By heaven!" said Monsieur, in the innocent manner of a husband who triumphs, "he was careful not to speak of it to you himself since he cautioned every one not to tell you of it."

"I don't understand you?" said Madame, irritated.

"I said that they wished to keep you ignorant of it."

"Why should they hide it from me?"

"For fear that your friendship would lead you to reveal something to the young Queen, that is all."

Madame lowered her head; she was mortally hurt. She could have no further peace until she had met the King, since a monarch is very naturally the last one in the kingdom who knows what is said of him, and a lover is the only one who is ignorant of what is said of his mistress.

When the King saw Madame was looking for him, he came to her somewhat troubled, but still attentive and gracious. Madame waited for him to be the first to speak of La Vallière. Then as he did not allude to her:

"What of the poor young girl?" she asked.

"What young girl?" said the King.

"La Vallière. Did you not tell me, Sire, that she had fainted?"

"She is still very ill," said the King, affecting the greatest indifference.

"But that will harm the rumor you were to spread, Sire."

"What rumor?"

"That you were attentive to her."

"Oh! I hope it will be reported just the same," replied the King, abstractedly.

Still Madame waited; she wished to see if the King would allude to the adventure of the royal oak himself.

But Louis did not mention it. Madame never referred to it, and the King took leave of her without having confided to her anything about it.

Scarcely had she seen the King depart than she sought Saint-

Aignan. He was easy to find ; he was like the ships that always follow in the wake of larger vessels.

Saint-Aignan was just the man Madame needed in her state of mind at that interval. He was looking for an ear more worthy than the others into which he could pour every detail of the episode. So he did not spare Madame a single word. When he had finished :

"Confess," said Madame, "that this is a charming invention."

"Invention, no ; fact, yes."

"Confess that whether invention or truth, you were told it as you tell it to me, but that you were not present."

"Madame, upon my honor I was there."

"And you think that avowal made an impression on the King?"

"As that of Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente on me," replied Saint-Aignan. "Listen, Madame : Mademoiselle de la Vallière compared the King to the sun ; that was flattering."

"The King does not let himself be influenced by such flattery."

"Madame, the King is at least just as much a man as a sun ; and I saw him a while ago when La Vallière fainted in his arms."

"La Vallière in the arms of the King?"

"Oh, it was a pretty picture ; imagine it : La Vallière fell back and —"

"Well, what did you see ? Tell me."

"I saw what ten others saw at the same time as I myself ; I saw that when La Vallière fell into his arms the King himself almost fainted."

Madame gave a little cry, the only indication of her smothered anger.

"Thank you," said she, laughing hysterically, "you are a delightful story-teller, M. de Saint-Aignan."

And alone, and almost choking, she hurried away towards the château.

CHAPTER XXV.

NIGHT.

MONSIEUR had left the princess in the best possible humor, and as he was very tired, he retired to his apartments, leaving the others to finish the night as they pleased. He began his toilet for the night with a care which evinced itself at times in paroxysms of satisfaction.

So while his valets went on with their work he hummed the principal airs of the ballet which the violins had played and which the King had danced. Then he summoned his tailors, had them show him his clothes for the following day, and as he was pleased with them, he distributed several ecus among them. Finally, when the Chevalier de Lorraine, who had seen him return, entered Monsieur overwhelmed him with kindness.

The latter, after saluting the prince, was silent for an instant, like a captain of sharpshooters who is deciding on what point he will open fire; then seeming to have decided he said:

"Have you noticed a strange thing, my lord?"

"No. What is it?"

"The bad reception his Majesty apparently gave the Comte de Guiche."

"Apparently?"

"Yes, since in reality he was returned to favor."

"Why, I did not see that," said the prince.

"What! you did not see that instead of sending him back into exile, as would have been natural, he sanctioned his strange resistance by allowing him to return to his place in the ballet?"

"And you think the King was wrong, chevalier?" asked Monsieur.

"Are you not of my opinion, prince?"

"Not entirely, chevalier, and I approve the King's not having shown anger against a poor fellow who is more foolish than malicious."

"Well," said the cavalier, "for myself I confess that this magnanimity astonishes me extremely."

"Why so?" asked Philippe.

"Because I should have thought the King more jealous," replied the chevalier, mechanically.

For several instants Monsieur had felt something irritating

in the words of his favorite; the last word set fire to the powder.

"Jealous!" cried the prince; "jealous! What do you mean by that? Jealous of what, if you please? Jealous of whom?"

The chevalier perceived that he had let fall one of those mischievous words that sometimes escaped him. He strove to recall it while it was still possible to do so.

"Jealous of his authority," said he, with affected innocence; "of what would you suppose the King would be jealous?"

"Ah," said my lord, "very good."

"Would your royal Highness," continued the chevalier, "have asked pardon of this dear Comte de Guiche?"

"Why, no!" said Monsieur. "De Guiche is a man of courage and intelligence, but he has been flirting with Madame, and I wish him neither good nor ill."

The chevalier had spoken bitterly about De Guiche as he had tried to do about the King; but he thought he saw that the time had come for indulgence and even the most absolute indifference, and that to throw some light on the question he might be obliged to put the lamp under the husband's very nose.

By this means one sometimes burns others, but often one burns one's self.

"Well, well," said the chevalier to himself, "I shall wait for De Wardes; he can do more in a day than I can do in a month, for I think, God forgive me, or, rather, God forgive him, that he is even more jealous than I am. And then it is not De Wardes I need, but an event, and in all this I see none. That De Guiche has returned when he was sent away is certainly serious; but all seriousness disappears when one reflects that De Guiche returns at the moment when Madame no longer thinks of him. In short, Madame is occupied with the King; that is clear; but Madame cannot be occupied for long with the King if, as they say, the King no longer thinks of Madame. The result of all this is that we should keep calm and await the dawn of a new fancy which will determine the result."

Thereupon the chevalier stretched himself resignedly in the armchair which Monsieur allowed him to occupy in his presence; and as there were no further evil insinuations to be made, the Chevalier de Lorraine was no longer witty.

Fortunately Monsieur had his supply of good humor, as we have said, and he had enough for two until the moment when

he dismissed his valets and gentlemen and passed into his sleeping-room.

On retiring he asked the chevalier to present his compliments to Madame and to say to her that as it was cool Monsieur, who was afraid of the tooth-ache, would not go into the park again that night.

The chevalier entered the princess's apartments just as she herself was returning.

He acquitted himself of his commission like a faithful messenger, and at once noticed the indifference, even the annoyance, with which Madame received the communication from her husband.

This fact appeared to him to conceal something new. Had Madame been leaving her apartments with that strange manner he would have followed her. But she was returning, and there was nothing to be done; he turned on his heels like an idle heron, questioned the air, the earth, and the water, shook his head, and mechanically set out toward the gardens.

He had not gone a hundred feet before he met two young men walking arm in arm, with bent heads, kicking the small stones out of the path as they strode on deep in thought. It was De Guiche and De Bragelonne.

As usual they produced on the Chevalier de Lorraine a feeling of instinctive repulsion. Nevertheless he gave them a low bow, which was returned with interest. Then, seeing that the park was becoming deserted, that the illuminations were beginning to be put out, that the breeze of early morning was awaking, he turned to the left and entered the château by the small court-yard. The others went to the right and continued on their way toward the large park.

Just as the chevalier ascended the side staircase which led to the private entrance he saw a woman, followed by another, appear under the arcade which opened from the smaller to the larger court-yard.

The two women hastened their steps, which were betrayed by the rustling of their silk dresses in the already silent night.

The style of their cloaks, their elegant figures, the mysterious and at the same time haughty carriage which distinguished them both, especially the one who walked first, struck the chevalier.

"I certainly know those women," said he, stopping on the last step of the small staircase.

Then as with the instinct of a bloodhound he was about to follow them, one of his lackeys who had been running after him for several instants stopped him.

"Monsieur," said he, "the courier has arrived."

"Good!" said the chevalier; "we have time enough; to-morrow will do."

"There are some important letters which Monsieur will perhaps be glad to read."

"Ah!" said the chevalier, "from where do they come?"

"One comes from England and the other from Calais; the latter came by express and seems very important."

"From Calais! who the devil is writing me from Calais?"

"I thought I recognized the handwriting of your friend M. de Wardes."

"Oh, in that case I will come up at once," said the chevalier, forgetting his plan of playing the spy. He went up, while the two unknown ladies disappeared at the end of the court-yard opposite the one by which they had just entered.

We will follow them, leaving the chevalier alone with his correspondence.

When they had reached the grove, the first stopped somewhat out of breath, and cautiously raising her hood said:

"Are we still far from the tree?"

"Oh, yes, Madame, more than five hundred paces; but rest a moment; you cannot walk much longer at this rate."

"You are right."

And the princess, for it was she, leaned against a tree.

"Come, mademoiselle," she resumed, having recovered her breath, "hide nothing from me; tell me the truth."

"Oh, Madame, you are already angry with me," said the young girl, anxiously.

"No, my dear Athenais, reassure yourself, for I am not at all angry with you. After all, this matter does not concern me. You are anxious about what you may have said under this oak; you are afraid of having wounded the King, and I wish to calm you by finding out for myself if you could have been overheard."

"Oh, yes, Madame, the King was very near us."

"But you were not speaking in so loud a tone that some of your words may not have been lost?"

"Madame, we thought we were absolutely alone."

"There were three of you?"

"Yes; La Vallière, Montalais, and myself."

"And you yourself spoke lightly of the King?"

"I fear so. But if so, your Highness will have the goodness to make my peace with his Majesty, will you not, Madame?"

"Yes; if there is need, I promise you I shall. However, as I told you, it is better not to anticipate evil, but to make sure if there were any harm done. The night is very dark, and still darker under these great trees. You may not have been recognized by the King. To inform him of it by being the first to speak would be to denounce yourself."

"Oh, Madame, if Mademoiselle de la Vallière were recognized, I was too. Besides, M. de Saint-Aignan left no doubt on the subject."

"But did you say anything very unflattering of the King?"

"Oh, no, Madame. But one of the others said some very flattering things, and so my words stood out in contrast to hers."

"That Montalais is so foolish!" said Madame.

"Oh! it was not Montalais, she said nothing. It was La Vallière."

Madame started as if she had not already known this perfectly.

"Oh, no, no," said she; "the King could not have heard. Besides, we will try the test for which we came out. Show me the oak."

And Madame resumed her walk.

"Do you know where it is?" she continued.

"Alas, yes, Madame."

"Can you find it again?"

"I could find it with closed eyes."

"That is well; you will sit down on the bench where you were and where La Vallière was; I shall hide behind the bushes, and if I can hear you I shall let you know."

"Yes, Madame."

"And if we find that you really spoke low enough for the King to have overheard you, well —"

Athenais waited anxiously for the end of the sentence.

"Well," said Madame, in a voice choked, no doubt, by her hasty walking, "well, I shall protect you."

And she hurried on. Suddenly she stopped.

"I have an idea," said she.

"And a good one, surely," said Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente.

"Montalais ought to be just as embarrassed as you two."

"Less so; for she said less and therefore compromised herself less."

"No matter; she can help you by a little lie."

"Oh, especially if she knows Madame is good enough to take an interest in me."

"Well, I think I have found what we need, my child."

"How fortunate!"

"You will say that all three of you knew perfectly well that the King as well as M. de Saint-Aignan was behind the tree or the bushes, I do not know which."

"Yes, Madame."

"For you must not hide from yourself, Athenais, the fact that Saint-Aignan took advantage of some very flattering remarks which you made about him."

"Well, Madame, you see clearly that we were heard since M. de Saint-Aignan heard us," cried Athenais.

Madame had spoken thoughtlessly, and she bit her lip.

"Oh, you know how Saint-Aignan is!" said she; "the favor of the King makes him silly, and he talks at random; frequently, even, he invents. Besides, that is not the point. The question is did or did not the King hear?"

"Well, Madame, he did hear!" said Athenais, hopelessly.

"In that case, do as I have said. Maintain boldly that all three of you, all three, you understand, for if there is any doubt about one, there will be about the others, — maintain, I say, that all three of you knew of the presence of the King and Saint-Aignan, and that you wanted to have some fun at the expense of the eavesdroppers."

"Oh, Madame, at the expense of the King! We would never dare say that!"

"But it was a joke, pure and simple. An innocent joke and easily pardoned in women whom men are trying to take by surprise. In this way everything will be explained. What Montalais said of Malicorne, a mere joke; what you said of M. de Saint-Aignan, a mere joke; what La Vallière said —"

"And which she would like to recall."

"Are you sure of that?"

"Oh, yes, I am positive."

"Well, all the more reason why the whole thing should be a joke. In that case M. de Malicorne will not be angry, M. de Saint-Aignan will be embarrassed, and he, instead of

you, will be laughed at. Finally, the King will be punished for curiosity unworthy of his rank. Let the King be laughed at a little for this and I do not believe he will complain of it."

"Ah, Madame, you are truly an angel of kindness and intelligence."

"It is to my interest."

"How so?"

"You ask how it is to my interest to save my maids of honor from gossip, annoyance, and perhaps scandal? Alas! you know, my child, that the court has no sympathy for those peccadilloes. But we have been walking a long time. Shall we not soon be there?"

"It is still some fifty or sixty feet away. Turn to the left, Madame, if you please."

"Are you sure of Montalais?" asked Madame.

"Oh, yes."

"Will she do everything you want?"

"Everything; she will be enchanted."

"How about La Vallière?" hazarded the princess.

"Well, she will be more difficult, Madame; she hates to tell a falsehood."

"But when she finds it is to her interest —"

"I am afraid that that will in no way change her ideas."

"Yes, yes," said Madame. "I have already been told that she is a very particular person, one of those affectedly pious ones who put God in front of them that they may hide behind Him. But if she is unwilling to lie, — as she will expose herself to the jests of the whole court, as she will have provoked the King by a confession as absurd as it is immodest, — Mademoiselle de la Baume le Blanc de la Vallière could not find fault with me for sending her back to her pigeons, in order that in Touraine yonder, or in Le Blaisois, I do not know which, she may at her ease study sentiment and pastoral life."

These words were uttered with a vehemence and harshness which startled Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente. Consequently she promised, so far as she was concerned, to tell as many untruths as might be necessary.

At this moment Madame and her companion reached the royal oak.

"Here we are," said Tonnay-Charente.

"We shall soon learn if they heard," replied Madame.

"Hush!" said the young girl, detaining Madame with a hasty gesture, wholly forgetful of etiquette.

Madame stopped.

"You see that they must have heard," said Athenais.

"Why?"

"Listen."

Madame held her breath, and the following words, uttered in mournful, modulated tones, floated to her through the air:

"Oh, I tell you, vicomte, I tell you that I am madly in love. I love her to distraction."

At the voice Madame gave a start, and beneath her hood a happy smile illumined her face.

It was she now who stopped her companion, and with a light step leading her back some twenty feet out of range of the voice said to her:

"Remain here, my dear Athenais, and let no one surprise us. I think they are discussing you."

"Me, Madame?"

"Yes, you, or rather your adventure. I will go and listen; two of us would be discovered. Go, and get Montalais and both of you wait for me on the edge of the wood."

Then, as Athenais hesitated:

"Go!" said the princess, in a tone which admitted of no reply.

Athenais arranged her rustling skirts, and by a path around the clump of trees returned to the garden.

As for Madame, she hid in the thicket, leaning back against a gigantic chestnut-tree, one of the branches of which had been cut into a seat. And then, full of anxiety and of fear:

"Now," said she, "come, since one can hear from here, — we will learn what this other foolish lover named the Comte de Guiché has to say of me to M. de Bragelonne."

CHAPTER XXVI.

IN WHICH MADAME ACQUIRES THE PROOF THAT BY LISTENING
ONE CAN HEAR WHAT IS SAID.

THERE was silence for a moment, as if all the mysterious noises of the night were stilled in order to listen with Madame to this youthful and passionate confidence.

Raoul was speaking. He was leaning idly against the trunk of the great oak, and replied in his sweet, soft voice :

"Alas, my dear De Guiche, it is a great misfortune."

"Yes," said the other, "very great."

"You do not catch my words, De Guiche, or rather you do not comprehend me. I say that a great misfortune has come to you, not because you love, but because you cannot hide your love."

"What do you mean?" cried De Guiche.

"You do not perceive one thing, namely, that now it is no longer to your only friend, that is, to a man who would kill himself rather than betray you — you do not perceive, I say, that it is to your friend alone that you confide your love; you tell it to the first comer."

"To the first comer?" cried De Guiche; "are you mad, Bragelonne, to say such a thing to me?"

"It is true."

"Impossible! How could I have become so indiscreet?"

"I mean, my friend, that your eyes, your gestures, your sighs tell against you; that all deep passion leads a man beyond himself. Then he no longer is master of himself; he is prey to a grief which makes him tell his trouble to the trees, to the horses, to the air, from the moment that there is no intelligent being within range of his voice. Now, my poor friend, remember this: it is very seldom that there is not some one near to overhear the thing which ought not to be overheard."

De Guiche heaved a deep sigh.

Bragelonne continued: "You distress me; since your return you have a hundred times and in a hundred different ways shown your love for her; and yet had you said nothing your coming back in itself would be very indiscreet. I return, therefore, to this conclusion, that if you do not guard yourself more closely than you do, some day or other there will be an ex-

plosion. Who will save you then? Tell me who will save her? For innocent as she may be of your love, your love will be an accusation against her in the hands of her enemies."

"My God!" murmured De Guiche, accompanying his words by a deep sigh.

"That is not answering, De Guiche."

"Yes, it is."

"Well, come, what is your answer?"

"This, my friend, that when such a day arrives I shall be no more dead than I am to-day."

"I do not understand."

"Yes; so many troubles have worn me out. To-day I am no longer a thinking, acting being; I am not equal to the most mediocre man; thus you see my last bit of strength is exhausted, my last resolutions have vanished, and I give up the struggle. When one is out camping, as we have been together, and sets off alone for a skirmish, he sometimes meets a party of five or six foragers, and although alone he defends himself; then there arrive six others, but they rouse him and he persists; but if six, eight, or ten more should come upon the scene, he would set spurs to his horse, if he still had one, or let himself be killed rather than run away. Well, such is my case; at first I struggled against myself; afterwards against Buckingham. Now the King has come; and I will not struggle against him, nor even — I hasten to add — though the King should retire from the field — nor even against the nature of that woman. Still, I do not deceive myself; having entered the service of this love, I will die in it."

"It is not the lady whom you should reproach," replied Raoul, "but yourself."

"Why so?"

"What! you know that the princess is somewhat gay, devoted to novelties, susceptible to flattery, be it that of a blind man or a child, and yet you let your love almost consume you? Look at her, love her; for no one whose heart is not already lost can see her without loving her. Yet while you love her, respect in her first her husband's rank, then herself, and finally your own safety."

"Thanks, Raoul."

"For what?"

"Because, seeing that I suffer through this woman, you sympathize with me, because you tell me all the good that you

can think of her, and perhaps even that which you do not think."

"Oh," said Raoul, "you are mistaken, De Guiche. I do not always say what I think; I keep still; but when I speak, I know not either how to pretend or to deceive, and whoever listens to me must believe me."

During this conversation, with head bent forward, anxious ear, and dilated eye, Madame strove to penetrate the darkness, and greedily drank in the faintest whisper which touched the branches.

"Oh, I know her better than you do," cried De Guiche, "she is not gay, but frivolous; she is not fond of novelty, she is forgetful and without faith; she is not purely and simply susceptible to flattery, but she is a practised and cruel coquette. A thorough coquette, I know. Believe me, Bragelonne, I am suffering all the torments of hell. Brave, passionately fond of danger, I have found a danger greater than my strength and my courage. But you see, Raoul, I am reserving for myself a victory which will cost her many tears."

Raoul looked at his friend, who, overcome by emotion, rested his head against the trunk of the oak.

"A victory! What victory?"

"What victory?"

"Yes."

"Some day I shall accost her, and shall say to her, 'I was young, I was madly in love; I had, however, sufficient respect to fall at your feet and remain with my head in the dust, if your glances had not raised me to your hand. I thought I understood your looks, I arose, and then without having done anything to you except love you more, if that were possible, then, from mere heartlessness, you dashed me to earth again, you a woman without a heart, without faith, without love! you are not worthy, princess of the royal blood though you are, you are not worthy of the love of an honest man; and I punish myself with death for having loved you too well, and I die hating you.'"

"Oh!" cried Raoul, frightened at the tone of deep conviction which showed in the young man's words. "Oh, I spoke truly, De Guiche; you are mad."

"Yes, yes," cried De Guiche, following out his idea, "since we are having no more wars here, I shall go yonder to the north, seek service in the empire, and some Hungarian, or

"Croat, or Turk may be charitable enough to send a bullet through me."

De Guiche had scarcely finished when a sound made him start, and brought Raoul to his feet at the same moment.

As for De Guiche, absorbed in what he was saying and thinking, he remained seated, his head pressed between his hands.

Suddenly the bushes were parted and a woman, pale and dishevelled, appeared before the two young men. With one hand she pushed aside the branches which otherwise would have struck her face, and with the other she threw back the hood of the cloak which covered her shoulders.

By her clear and sparkling glance, by her royal carriage, by her haughty gesture, and still more by the beating of his heart, De Guiche recognized Madame, and giving a cry hid his face in his hands.

Trembling and embarrassed, Raoul stammered some vague words of respect.

"M. de Bragelonne," said the princess. "be kind enough, I beg of you, to see if my attendants are not somewhere yonder in the walks or the groves. And you, M. le Comte, remain; I am tired; give me your arm."

Had a thunderbolt fallen at the wretched man's feet he would have been less frightened than by the cold, hard accents.

Nevertheless, as he had just said, he was brave, and as in the depths of his heart he had formed his resolutions, De Guiche rose, and seeing Bragelonne's hesitation, gave him a glance full of resignation and deep gratitude.

Instead of replying at once to Madame, he took one step towards the vicomte, and holding out the arm the princess had asked for, he grasped the loyal hand of his friend with a sigh, in which he seemed to give to friendship all the life that was left in the depths of his heart.

Madame waited — she so proud, she who knew not how to wait — until this mute colloquy was at an end. Her royal hand remained suspended in the air, and when Raoul had gone it fell without anger, but not without emotion, into that of De Guiche.

They were alone in the midst of the dark, silent forest; nothing was heard save the steps of Raoul as they retreated hastily along the obscure paths. Above them extended the

thick and fragrant arch of the forest foliage, through the openings of which here and there a few stars were seen shining.

Madame led De Guiche gently some hundred feet from the indiscreet tree which had overheard and allowed to be heard so many things that evening, and conducted him to an open space near by, so that they could see for some distance around them.

"I have brought you here," said she, in a trembling voice, "because from where we were every word can be heard."

"Every word can be heard, you say, Madame?" repeated the young man, mechanically.

"Yes."

"Which means?" murmured De Guiche.

"Which means that I heard all you said!"

"Oh, my God! my God! only this was lacking!" stammered De Guiche.

And he bent his head like a swimmer wearied by the wave which engulfs him.

"So," said she, "you think me what you said?"

De Guiche grew pale, turned aside his head, and said nothing. He felt like fainting.

"It is well," continued the princess, in a tone full of sweetness; "I prefer this frankness which wounds me to flattery which deceives. So, according to you, M. de Guiche, I am a coquette and worthless."

"Worthless!" cried the young man, "you worthless! I—surely I did not say, I could not have said, that what was most precious to me in the whole world was worthless. No, I did not say that."

"A woman who sees a man dying consumed by a love which she has inspired, and who does not quell that love, is, in my opinion, a worthless woman."

"Oh, what matters it to you what I said?" cried the count. "What am I, alas! to you? and why should you trouble yourself whether I exist or not?"

"M. de Guiche, you are a man as I am a woman, and knowing you as I do, I do not wish you to run any risk of dying; I shall change my conduct and my character with you. I shall be, not frank, as I always am, but honest. I beseech you, therefore, count, to love me no more, and to forget completely that I have ever given you a word or a glance."

De Guiche turned, casting a glance of passionate adoration on her.

"You," said he, "you make excuses! you implore me?"

"Yes, certainly; since I have done evil I ought to repair it. So, count, this is what we will agree to. You will forgive my frivolity, my coquetry. Do not interrupt me; I shall forgive you for having said that I was frivolous and a coquette, or something more, perhaps; you will renounce your idea of death and will keep for your family, for the King, and for the ladies, a cavalier whom every one esteems and whom very many love."

Madame uttered the last word in a tone of such frankness and tenderness that the heart of the young man was ready to burst.

"Oh! Madame! Madame!" he stammered.

"Listen further," she continued; "when you have renounced me, at first from necessity, afterwards in order to grant my entreaty, you will judge me more favorably, and I am sure you will replace this love — pardon the unseemly word — by a sincere friendship which you will offer me, and which I promise you will be warmly accepted."

De Guiche's brow was covered with perspiration, death lay in his heart, a shiver ran through his body; he bit his lips, stamped his foot, thus devouring in a word all his grief.

"Madame," said he, "what you offer me is impossible, and I will never accept such an arrangement."

"What!" said Madame, "you refuse my friendship?"

"Not friendship, Madame, I would rather die of love than live for friendship."

"Monsieur!"

"Oh, Madame," cried De Guiche, "I have reached a point where there is no other consideration, no other respect than the consideration and the respect of an honorable man towards the woman he adores. Drive me away, curse me, denounce me. You will be right. I have complained of you, but I complained so bitterly only because I love you; I have told you I would die, and die I will. If I live you will forget me; dead, you will never forget me, I am sure."

And she who stood by, deep in thought and as agitated as the young man, turned aside her head for a moment, as an instant before he had turned his.

Then after a moment's silence she asked:

"So you love me very much?"

"Madly. Madly enough to die, as you said, whether you drive me away or listen further to me."

"It is a hopeless case, then," said she, playfully; "a case which must be treated with gentleness. Give me your hand — it is like ice!"

De Guiche knelt down, pressing his lips not to one but to both of Madame's burning hands.

"Well, love me, then," said the princess, "since it cannot be otherwise."

And she pressed his fingers almost imperceptibly, thus raising him partly as a queen would have done, and partly as one who loved him.

De Guiche trembled from head to foot.

Madame felt the young man quiver and realized that he loved her truly.

"Your arm, count," said she, "let us return."

"Ah, Madame," said he, swaying and bewildered, a cloud of flame before his eyes. "Ah! you have found a third way of killing me!"

"Fortunately it is the longest, is it not?" replied she.

And she led him towards the grove.

CHAPTER XXVII.

ARAMIS' CORRESPONDENCE.

WHILE De Guiche's affairs, thus suddenly set to rights, although he was unable to guess the cause of their improvement, assumed the unlooked-for turn we have seen, Raoul in obedience to Madame's request had withdrawn, in order not to interrupt an explanation the results of which he was far from surmising, and had joined the ladies of honor who were wandering about the flower-garden.

Meanwhile the Chevalier de Lorraine returned to his room, and read with surprise the letter from De Wardes, which informed him by the hand of his valet of the sword-thrust received at Calais, and all the details of this adventure, and ended with the request that he would communicate to De Guiche and Monsieur whatever there might be in the affair particularly disagreeable to both of them.

De Wardes tried particularly to prove to the chevalier the violence of Madame's love for Buckingham, and he concluded his letter by stating that he thought this feeling was returned.

On reading the last paragraph the chevalier shrugged his shoulders; as a matter of fact, De Wardes was far behind-hand, as one could see. De Wardes was still only at Buckingham's affair.

The chevalier threw the paper over his shoulder upon a table near by and said scornfully:

"Really it is incredible; and yet this poor De Wardes is an intelligent fellow; but in truth, this is not very apparent; it is so easy to grow rusty in the country. The devil take the stupid, who ought to have written me about matters of importance and yet writes such nonsense. Instead of that wretched letter which does not mean anything, I should have found there in the grove a nice little intrigue which would have compromised a woman, would perhaps have been as good as a sword-thrust for a man, and might have diverted Monsieur for three days."

He looked at his watch.

"Now," said he, "it is too late. One o'clock in the morning; every one has probably returned to the King's apartments to finish the night. Well, it is a lost scent, and unless some extraordinary chance —"

And speaking thus, as if appealing to his lucky star, the chevalier angrily approached the window, which opened upon a somewhat solitary portion of the garden.

All at once, and as if some evil genius were at his orders, he perceived returning to the château, in company with a man, a mantle of dark-colored silk, and recognized the figure which had struck him half an hour before.

"Well! well!" thought he, striking his hands together; "I'll be damned! as our friend Buckingham says, here is my mystery!"

And he rushed down the steps in the hope of reaching the court in time to recognize the woman of the cloak and her companion.

But on reaching the door of the small court-yard he knocked against Madame, whose radiant face appeared full of charming revelations beneath the hood which protected without concealing her.

Unfortunately she was alone.

The chevalier realized that since he had seen her not five minutes before with a gentleman, the latter could not be very far away. Consequently he scarcely took the time to salute the princess, as he drew back to let her pass; then when she had taken several steps with the haste of a woman who fears to be recognized, when the chevalier saw that she was too much taken up with herself to think about him, he rushed into the garden, glanced rapidly around, and embraced in his glance as much of the horizon as he could.

He was just in time; the gentleman who had accompanied Madame was still in sight; but he was hurrying on towards one of the wings of the château behind which he would soon disappear.

There was not a minute to be lost. The chevalier threw himself in pursuit, slackening his pace on approaching the stranger; but in spite of the haste he had used, the unknown turned the steps in advance of him.

However, since he was walking slowly, buried in thought, with head bent under its weight of grief or joy, it was evident that when once the corner was turned, unless he entered some door, the chevalier could not fail to overtake him.

This is what certainly would have happened if, just as he turned the corner, the chevalier had not run against two persons who were walking in the opposite direction. The chevalier was on the point of opening a quarrel with these two troublesome individuals, when on raising his head he recognized the superintendent.

Fouquet was accompanied by a man whom the chevalier now saw for the first time.

It was his Grace the Bishop of Vannes.

Checked by the importance of the man, and forced by politeness to make apologies when he expected to receive them, the chevalier stepped back a few paces; and — since M. Fouquet had, if not the friendship, at least the respect of every one; since the King himself, although he was rather his enemy than his friend, treated him as a man of importance, — the chevalier bowed to M. Fouquet, who saluted him with kindly courtesy, seeing that the gentleman had run against him by mistake and with no evil intention.

Then almost immediately, having recognized the Chevalier de Lorraine, he paid him a few compliments to which the chevalier was forced to reply.

Brief as was the conversation, the Chevalier de Lorraine saw with great displeasure the figure of the stranger growing fainter and fainter, until it disappeared in the darkness.

Then he resigned himself, and once resigned gave his whole attention to Fouquet.

"Ah, monsieur, you arrive very late. They have been greatly troubled here by your absence, and I heard Monsieur wonder that having been invited by the King, you did not come."

"It was impossible, monsieur; so soon as I was free I came."

"Is Paris quiet?"

"Perfectly. Paris has borne the last tax very well."

"Ah, I understand that you wished to make sure of this good feeling before coming to take part in our fêtes."

"I have arrived somewhat late, however. Therefore I appeal to you, monsieur, to ask whether the King is out of doors or in the château, whether I can see him this evening or whether I must wait until to-morrow."

"We have not seen the King for about half an hour," said the chevalier.

"Perhaps he is at Madame's?" asked Fouquet.

"I scarcely think so, for I have just met Madame returning by the private stairway; and unless the gentleman you passed just now was the King—"

And the chevalier waited, hoping that he might thus find out the name of the one he had followed.

But Fouquet, whether he had recognized De Guiche or not, merely replied:

"No, monsieur, it was not the King."

The chevalier, disappointed, bowed, but as he did so he glanced around, and seeing M. Colbert in the midst of a group:

"Wait, monsieur," said he to the superintendent; "yonder under the trees is some one who can inform you better than I."

"Who?" demanded Fouquet, whose poor sight prevented him from seeing through the darkness.

"M. Colbert," replied the chevalier.

"Ah! very good. Is M. Colbert the one yonder who is talking to the man carrying the torches?"

"Yes. He is giving his orders to the illuminators for to-morrow."

"Thank you, monsieur."

And Fouquet gave a nod which showed that he had learned all that he wanted to know.

On his side the chevalier, who on the contrary had learned nothing, gave a low bow and retired.

Scarcely had he gone before Fouquet with frowning brow fell into a deep reverie.

Aramis looked at him a moment with a kind of compassion full of sadness.

"Well," said he, "you seem affected by the very name of this man. Just a moment ago you were triumphant and happy, and the mere sight of that man has made you sad. Tell me, monsieur, do you believe in your lucky star?"

"No," sadly replied Fouquet.

"Why?"

"Because I am too happy at this present moment," he replied in a trembling voice. "Ah, my dear D'Herblay, you who are so learned must know the history of a certain tyrant of Samos. What can I throw into the sea to avert approaching evil? Oh! I repeat to you, my friend, I am too happy, so happy that I desire nothing beyond what I have. I have risen so high — you know my motto, *Quo non ascendam?* — I have risen so high that I have nothing to do now except to fall. It is therefore impossible for me to believe in the further progress of a career that is already more than human."

Aramis smiled and looked at Fouquet with his kind and penetrating glance.

"If I knew your good fortune," said he, "I should perhaps fear your downfall; but you look upon me as a true friend; that is, you turn to me in misfortune only. It is indeed a great deal, and very precious, I know; but as a matter of fact, I have a perfect right to beg you to confide in me from time to time the happiness which comes to you and at which I should rejoice, you know, more than if it had come to me."

"My dear prelate," said Fouquet, laughing "my secrets are far too profane for me to confide to a bishop, worldly as he may be."

"Bah! In confession?"

"Oh, I should blush too much if you were my confessor."

And Fouquet began to sigh.

Aramis again looked at him without other manifestation of his thought than his placid smile.

"Well," said he, "discretion is a great virtue."

"Silence!" said Fouquet. "That venomous beast has recognized me and is coming to us."

"Colbert?"

"Yes. Go away, my dear D'Herblay; I do not wish that fellow to see you with me or he will take an aversion to you."

Aramis pressed his hand.

"What need have I of his friendship," said he, "while I have you?"

"Yes, but perhaps I shall not always be here," replied Fouquet, sadly.

"On that day, if it should ever come," said Aramis, quietly, "we will plan how to dispense with the friendship or brave the dislike of M. Colbert. But tell me, dear M. Fouquet, instead of conversing with that fellow, as you do him the honor of calling him, — a conversation the use of which I do not see, — why do you not go to the King or at least to Madame?"

"To Madame?" said the superintendent, absorbed in his thoughts. "Yes, to Madame —"

"You remember," continued Aramis, "that we have been told of the great favor which Madame has enjoyed for the last two or three days. It enters, I believe, into your policy and into our plans for you to pay assiduous court to the friends of his Majesty. It is a means of counteracting the growing influence of M. Colbert. Betake yourself, therefore, as quickly as possible to Madame and treat this ally with consideration."

"But," said Fouquet, "are you quite sure that it is upon her that the King's eyes are fixed at present?"

"If the needle has veered it must have been since this morning. You know that I have my police."

"Good! I shall go there at once, and in any event I have a means of introduction, a magnificent pair of antique cameos set in diamonds."

"I have seen them; nothing could be richer and more regal."

At this moment they were interrupted by a lackey followed by a courier.

"For M. le Surintendant," said the courier, in a loud tone, handing a note to Fouquet.

"For Monseigneur the Bishop of Vannes," said the lackey in a low tone, giving a letter to Aramis.

As the lackey carried a torch, he placed himself between the two men, in order that both might read at the same time.

At sight of the fine delicate writing on the envelope, Fouquet started with delight. Only those who love or who are loved will understand first his anxiety and then his happiness. He quickly unsealed the letter, which contained only these few words :

"It is an hour since I left you, but a century since I told you 'I love you.'"

That was all.

Madame de Bellière had in fact parted from Fouquet an hour before, after having spent two days with him, and fearing his remembrance of her might be effaced for too long a time from the heart she missed she sent a courier as the bearer of this important missive.

Fouquet kissed the letter and gave the bearer a handful of gold.

As for Aramis, he on his side was reading with more coolness and reflection the following note :

"The King has been struck this evening with a strange fancy ; a woman loves him. He learned it by chance, while listening to the conversation of this young girl with her companions. The King is entirely given up to this new caprice. The girl's name is Mademoiselle de la Vallière, and she is of sufficient beauty for this caprice to become a strong passion. Beware of Mademoiselle de la Vallière."

Not a word of Madame.

Aramis slowly folded the missive and put it into his pocket.

As for Fouquet, he was still inhaling the perfume of his letter.

"My lord !" said Aramis, touching Fouquet on the arm.

"Well ?" demanded the latter.

"I have an idea. Do you know a little girl named La Vallière ?"

"No."

"Think."

"Oh, yes, I believe she is one of Madame's maids of honor."

"That may be."

"Well ?"

"Well, my lord, it is to this little girl that you must pay a call to-night."

"Bah ! and why ?"

"Furthermore, it is to this little girl that you must give your cameos."

"Come, now !"

"You know, my lord, that I give good advice."

"But this unforeseen —"

"That is my affair. Pay your court in due form to La Vallière, my lord. I will be your guarantee with Madame de Bellière that it will be most politic."

"What do you mean, my friend ?" cried Fouquet, quickly, "and what name did you utter ?"

"A name which ought to prove to you, monsieur, that being well informed about you, I may be as well informed about others. Pay court to the little La Vallière."

"I will pay court to whomsoever you like," replied Fouquet, paradise in his heart.

"Come, come, descend again to earth, traveller in the seventh heaven," said Aramis; "here is M. de Colbert. Oh, but he has been recruiting while we have been reading; he is surrounded, praised, congratulated; decidedly he is a power."

In fact, Colbert advanced escorted by all the courtiers in the gardens, and each paid him compliments upon the arrangement of the fête; all of which puffed him up well nigh to bursting.

"If La Fontaine were there," said Fouquet, smiling, "what a splendid chance it would give him to recite the fable of the *Frog that wanted to be as big as an Ox*."

Colbert came up in the midst of a shining circle. Fouquet waited for him, impassable and somewhat ironical. Colbert smiled also; he had seen his enemy a quarter of an hour before, and had been approaching gradually.

Colbert's smile was a presage of hostility.

"Oh, oh !" said Aramis in a low tone to the superintendent, "the rascal is going to ask you again for several millions with which to pay for his illuminations and his colored lights."

Colbert was the first to salute with a manner which he strove to make respectful.

Fouquet scarcely moved his head.

"Well, my lord," asked Colbert, "what do your eyes say ? Have we had good taste ?"

"Perfect," replied Fouquet, without evincing the least irony in his tone.

"Oh," said Colbert, maliciously, "you are indulgent. We are poor, we servants of the King, and Fontainebleau cannot be compared to Vaux."

"That is true," replied Fouquet, phlegmatically, holding the attention of all.

"What can you expect, my lord?" continued Colbert. "We have done the best we could with our small means."

Fouquet made a gesture of assent.

"But," went on Colbert, "it would be worthy of your generosity, monsieur, to offer to his Majesty a fête in your wonderful gardens — the gardens which cost you sixty millions."

"Seventy-two," said Fouquet.

"All the more reason," said Colbert. "It would really be magnificent."

"But do you think, monsieur," said Fouquet, "that his Majesty would deign to accept my invitation?"

"Oh, I have not the least doubt of it," said Colbert, quickly, "I will guarantee that he does."

"That is very kind of you," said Fouquet, "I may count on you, then?"

"Yes, my lord, certainly."

"I will think about it, then," said Fouquet.

"Accept, accept," whispered Aramis hastily.

"You will consider?" repeated Colbert.

"Yes," replied Fouquet, "to find out what day I can give the King my invitation."

"Oh, this evening, my lord, this evening."

"Very well," said the superintendent. "Gentlemen, I should like to extend an invitation to you, but you know that wherever the King goes he is at home; therefore you must be asked by his Majesty."

There was a murmur of delight in the crowd.

Fouquet bowed and withdrew.

"Proud wretch!" said Colbert, "you accept, and yet you know that it will cost you ten millions."

"You have ruined me," whispered Fouquet to Aramis.

"I have saved you," replied the latter, as Fouquet ascended the stairs and asked if the King were still visible.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE ORDERLY CLERK.

ANXIOUS to be by himself in order to think over what was going on in his heart, the King had retired to his own rooms, where M. de Saint-Aignan had found him after the conversation with Madame, which we have related.

Proud of his double importance, and feeling that two hours before he had become the King's confidant, the favorite, though still respectful, began to treat court affairs in rather a high-handed way, and from the point to which he had risen, or rather the position in which chance had placed him, he saw around him only love and garlands.

The King's love for Madame; that of Madame for the King; that of De Guiche for Madame; that of La Vallière for the King; that of Malicorne for Montalais; that of Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente for him, Saint-Aignan — was not all this more than enough to turn the head of a courtier?

Now Saint-Aignan was the model of all courtiers, past, present, and future.

Furthermore Saint-Aignan was such a good story-teller and such a subtle appreciator that the King listened to him, showing much interest, especially when he told of the eagerness with which Madame had asked for the conversation regarding the affairs of Mademoiselle de la Vallière.

Although the King no longer felt for Madame Henrietta what he once felt, there was in this eagerness of hers to gain information a gratification of his vanity that he could not resist. He was pleased, therefore, but that was all, and not for an instant was his heart alarmed at anything Madame might or might not think of the whole adventure. But when Saint-Aignan had finished, the King as he made his toilet for the night remarked:

"Now, Saint-Aignan, you know what Mademoiselle de la Vallière is, do you not?"

"Not only what she is, but what she will be."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that she is all that a woman could wish to be that is loved by your Majesty; I mean that she will be all that your Majesty wishes her to be."

"That is not what I asked. I do not wish to know what she is to-day and what she will be to-morrow, — that concerns me, as you have said, — but what she was yesterday. Repeat to me what is said of her."

"They say she is prudish."

"Oh," said the King, smiling, "that is mere rumor."

"Rare enough at court, Sire, for it to be believed when heard."

"Perhaps you are right, my dear fellow. And well born?"

"Very; daughter of the Marquis de la Vallière and step-daughter of that excellent M. de Saint-Remy."

"Ah, yes, my aunt's steward — I remember — and I remember too that I saw her as I passed through Blois. She was presented to the queens. I must forsooth reproach myself for not having paid her all the attention she deserved on that occasion."

"Oh, Sire, I depend on your Majesty to make up for lost time."

"And the report is, you say, that Mademoiselle de la Vallière has no lover?"

"In any case, I scarcely think your Majesty need fear rivalry."

"Wait," cried the King suddenly, in a serious tone.

"What, Sire?"

"I remember."

"Ah!"

"If she has not a lover, she is at least betrothed."

"Betrothed?"

"What, you did not know that, count?"

"No."

"You, who know everything!"

"Your Majesty will excuse me. And you know this betrothed?"

"Without doubt; his father came to ask me to sign the contract; it is —"

The King no doubt was about to pronounce the name of the Vicomte de Bragelonne, when suddenly he stopped with a frown.

"It is?" repeated Saint-Aignan.

"I no longer remember," replied Louis XIV., trying to conceal an emotion which he hid with difficulty.

"Can I put your Majesty in the way?" asked the Comte de Saint-Aignan.

"No; for I no longer know myself whom I mean; no, really; I remember very vaguely that one of the maids of honor was to marry — but the name escapes me."

"Was it Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente he was to marry?" asked Saint-Aignan.

"Possibly," said the King.

"Then her intended was M. de Montespan; but Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente did not mention it to me, I think, in such a way as to frighten away suitors."

"Well," said the King, "I know nothing or next to nothing of Mademoiselle de la Vallière. Saint-Aignan, I charge you to find out about her."

"Yes, Sire; and when shall I have the honor of seeing your Majesty to inform you?"

"When you have the desired information."

"I will have it soon, if it comes to me as quickly as my wish to see the King again."

"Well spoken! By the way, did Madame show any spite against this poor girl?"

"None, Sire."

"She was not angry?"

"I do not know; but she laughed constantly."

"Very good. However, it seems to me I hear a noise in the antechamber; they have come to announce some courier."

"Yes, Sire."

"Find out, Saint-Aignan."

The count hastened to the door and exchanged some words with the usher.

"Sire," said he, returning, "it is M. Fouquet who has just arrived, at an order from the King, he says. He presents himself, but as it is so late he will not beg for an audience this evening, but will merely have his presence announced."

"M. Fouquet! I wrote to him at three o'clock, inviting him to be at Fontainebleau the following morning; he arrives here at two o'clock; that is zeal indeed!" cried the King, radiant at seeing himself so well obeyed. "Well, M. Fouquet shall have an audience. I sent for him and I will receive him. Let him be admitted. You, count, follow up your inquiries and return to-morrow."

The King placed his finger on his lips, and Saint-Aignan felt his heart fill with joy as he gave the order to the clerk to admit M. Fouquet.

Thereupon Fouquet entered the royal chamber.

Louis XIV. rose to receive him.

"Good evening, M. Fouquet," said he, with a kindly smile, "I congratulate you on being so prompt; my message must have reached you late."

"At nine o'clock in the evening, Sire."

"You have been working a great deal lately, M. Fouquet, for I am told that you have not left your room at Saint-Mandé for three or four days."

"Yes, I have been shut up for three days, Sire," replied Fouquet, bowing.

"Do you know, M. Fouquet, that I have many things to say to you?" continued the King, with his most gracious manner.

"Your Majesty overwhelms me. And since you are so kind will you let me remind you of a promised audience you once made me?"

"Ah, yes, some churchman who thought he must thank me; was it not?"

"Yes, Sire. The hour is perhaps badly chosen, but the time of him I bring with me is very valuable, and as Fontainebleau is on the way to his diocese —"

"Who is it?"

"The last Bishop of Vannes, whom at my recommendation your Majesty deigned to appoint three months ago."

"That is possible," said the King, who had signed without reading. "Is he here?"

"Yes, Sire; Vannes is an important diocese; the flock of this pastor needs his divine care; they are savages whom it is always important to polish as well as instruct, and M. d'Herblay is without equal in missions of this kind."

"M. d'Herblay!" said the King, searching his memory as if this name, heard long ago, was not, however, unknown to him.

"Oh," said Fouquet, hastily, "your Majesty does not know the obscure name of one of your most faithful subjects and most valuable of servants?"

"No, I admit it. And he wishes to set off again?"

"He received letters to-day which will perhaps necessitate his leaving; so that before starting for the unknown country called Bretagne he is desirous of paying his respects to your Majesty."

"Is he waiting?"

"Yes, Sire."

"Have him enter."

Fouquet made a sign to the usher who stood behind the tapestry. The door opened and Aramis came in. The King let him pay his compliments, and fixed a long look on the face which, once seen, could never be forgotten.

"Vannes!" said he; "you are Bishop of Vannes, monsieur?"

"Yes, Sire."

"Is Vannes in Bretagne?"

Aramis bowed.

"Near the sea?"

Aramis bowed again.

"Some leagues from Belle-Isle?"

"Yes, Sire," said Aramis; "six, I believe."

"Six leagues are but a step," said Louis XIV.

"Not for us poor Bretons, Sire," said Aramis; "six leagues is a long distance if they are six leagues on land; if six on sea, the distance is immense. Besides, I have the honor to say to your Majesty that we count six leagues of sea from the river to Belle-Isle."

"They say that M. Fouquet has a very beautiful house there?" said the King.

"Yes, so it is said," replied Aramis, looking calmly at Fouquet.

"It is said?" repeated the King.

"Yes, Sire."

"Why really, M. Fouquet, one thing surprises me, you will admit."

"What is that?"

"That you have at the head of your parish a man like M. d'Herblay, and yet you have not shown him Belle-Isle."

"Oh, Sire," replied Aramis, without giving Fouquet time to reply; "we poor Breton prelates stay in our residences."

"M. de Vannes," said the King, "I shall punish M. Fouquet for his carelessness."

"In what way, Sire?"

"I shall change your residence."

Fouquet bit his lips; Aramis smiled.

"What income do you get from Vannes?" continued the King.

"Six thousand livres, Sire," said Aramis.

"In good sooth, a petty sum! But you have property of your own, M. de Vannes?"

"None at all, Sire; but M. Fouquet pays me twelve hundred livres a year for his pew rent."

"Well, M. d'Herblay, I can promise you more than that."

"Sire —"

"I shall remember you."

Aramis bowed.

The King saluted him almost with respect, as, for that matter, was his habit of doing with women and churchmen.

Aramis understood that his audience was at an end; he took leave in the simple manner of a country pastor and withdrew.

"His is a remarkable face," said the King, following him as far as he could see him, and even farther.

"Sire," replied Fouquet, "if this bishop had had an early education no prelate in the kingdom would have deserved distinction more than he."

"He is not educated?"

"He exchanged the sword for the chasuble, and that rather late in life. But no matter, if your Majesty will permit me to speak of M. de Vannes another time —"

"I beg you to do so. But before speaking of him let us talk of you, monsieur."

"Of me, Sire?"

"Yes. I have a thousand compliments to pay you."

"I cannot tell your Majesty with what joy you overwhelm me."

"Yes, M. Fouquet, I understand. I must admit I have had some prejudices against you."

"In that case I have been very unfortunate, Sire."

"But they have passed. Have you not noticed?"

"Yes, Sire, but I was quietly waiting the day of revelations. It seems that that day has come."

"Ah, you knew you were in disgrace?"

"Alas, yes, Sire."

"And do you know why?"

"Perfectly. Your Majesty thought me extravagant."

"Oh, no."

"Or rather a poor administrator. Your Majesty thought that because the people had no money the King would have none."

"Yes, I did think that ; but I am undeceived."

Fouquet bowed.

"And no uprisings, no complaints."

"And money," said Fouquet.

"The fact is that you have showered it upon me the past month."

"I still have some, not only for your Majesty's needs, but for all your fancies."

"Thank God, M. Fouquet," replied the King, seriously, "I shall not put you to the test. For two months I shall ask you for nothing."

"I shall take advantage of this to amass for your Majesty five or six millions which will be of use to you in case of war."

"Five or six millions ?"

"For your household alone, be it understood."

"You think there will be war, then, M. Fouquet ?"

"I think that if God has given to the eagle a beak and claws, it is for him to use them to show his royalty."

The King blushed with pleasure.

"We have spent a great deal during the past few days, M. Fouquet ; do you not scold me ?"

"Sire, your Majesty still has twenty years of youth and a thousand million to spend in those twenty years."

"A thousand million ! that is a very great deal, M. Fouquet," said the King.

"I will economize, Sire. Besides, in M. Colbert and myself your Majesty has two valuable men. The one will make you spend his money, and that will be myself, if of course my service still pleases your Majesty ; the other will make you economize, and this will be M. Colbert."

"M. Colbert !" cried the King, surprised.

"Certainly, Sire ; M. Colbert is excellent at keeping accounts." At this praise of the enemy by the enemy, the King felt himself filled with confidence and admiration.

There was neither in Fouquet's voice nor glance anything which could destroy the effect of the words he had just uttered ; he had not given praise in order to win the right to make two reproaches.

The King understood, and yielded to so much generosity and spirit.

"You praise M. Colbert ?" said he.

"Certainly, Sire ; for besides the fact of his being a man of

merit, I believe him to be thoroughly devoted to your Majesty's interests."

"Is that because he has so often clashed with yours?" asked the King, smiling.

"Exactly, Sire."

"Explain yourself."

"It is very simple. I am the man needed to get money; he is the one needed to keep it from being spent."

"Come, come, M. le Surintendant, the devil! you will certainly say something which will correct this good opinion."

"In regard to administrative abilities, Sire?"

"Yes."

"Not at all, Sire."

"Really?"

"On my honor, I know no better clerk in France than M. Colbert."

In 1661 the word "clerk" had not the servile meaning which it has to-day; but on leaving the lips of Fouquet, whom the King had just called M. le Surintendant, it acquired something humble and insignificant that restored Fouquet to his position and Colbert to his.

"Well," said Louis XIV., "nevertheless it was he, economical as he is, who ordered my fêtes at Fontainebleau; and I assure you, M. Fouquet, that he was far from preventing my money from being spent."

Fouquet bowed without replying.

"Is not that your opinion?" said the King.

"I think, Sire," replied the other, "that M. Colbert carried out everything with great order, and for this deserves the praise of your Majesty."

The word "order" was a fitting accompaniment to the word "clerk." No one was more keenly sensitive or more tactful than the King, who perceived and seized sensations before the sensations themselves.

Louis XIV. understood, therefore, that in Fouquet's opinion the clerk had been too well ordered; that is, that the splendid fêtes of Fontainebleau might have been more beautiful still.

Consequently the King felt that there might be some one who would find fault with his amusements; and he felt some of the vexation of a provincial who, attired in the best clothes his wardrobe can furnish, arrives in Paris, where the well-dressed man considers him too little or too much dressed.

This part of the conversation, so quietly yet so cleverly carried on by Fouquet, inspired the King with the highest esteem for the character of the man and the capability of the minister.

Fouquet left at two o'clock in the morning, and the King went to bed somewhat restless and confused on account of the indirect lesson he had just received; and two good quarters of an hour were spent by him in going over again in memory the embroideries, the tapestries, the menus of the suppers, the architecture of the triumphal arches, the arrangements for the illuminations and fireworks, planned by order of the clerk Colbert. The result was that the King, going over all that had happened during the past week, found that there had been some mistakes in his fêtes.

Thus by his courtesy, his grace and generosity, Fouquet had injured Colbert more deeply than the latter by his artifice, his ill-will, his persevering hatred had ever yet succeeded in hurting Fouquet.

CHAPTER XXIX.

FONTAINEBLEAU AT TWO O'CLOCK IN THE MORNING.

As we have seen, Saint-Aignan had left the King's chamber just as the superintendent entered it.

Saint-Aignan was charged with an important mission; and Saint-Aignan was going to do all in his power to make good use of his time.

The man we have introduced as the King's friend was an exceptional man; one of those valuable courtiers whose vigilance and acuteness of perception throw into the shade every favorite past and future, and whose accuracy counterbalanced the servility of Dangeau. So Dangeau was not the favorite but the toady of the King.

Saint-Aignan therefore considered. He thought that the first information he ought to have should come from De Guiche. Therefore he went to him. But De Guiche, whom we saw disappear around the wing of the château and who seemed to be going to his own room, did not do so.

Saint-Aignan set out in search of him. Having turned,

twisted, and searched, Saint-Aignan perceived something like a human form leaning against a tree.

This figure was as motionless as a statue, and seemed deeply engaged in watching a window, although its curtains were closely drawn.

As this window was Madame's, Saint-Aignan concluded that the figure was that of De Guiche. He advanced cautiously and saw that he was not mistaken.

After his conversation with Madame, De Guiche had carried away such a weight of happiness that all his strength of mind was not enough to enable him to support it.

On his side, Saint-Aignan knew that De Guiche had had something to do with the introduction of La Vallière into Madame's household; a courtier knows everything and remembers everything. Only he was ignorant of how and under what conditions De Guiche had accorded his protection to La Vallière. But as in asking many questions it is seldom that a man does not learn something, Saint-Aignan counted on learning much or little by questioning De Guiche with all tact and at the same time with all the insistence of which he was capable.

Saint-Aignan's plan was as follows: If the information were satisfactory he would tell the King with effusion that he had lighted on a pearl, and claim the privilege of setting the pearl in the royal crown.

If the information were unsatisfactory — which after all was possible — he would find out how much the King cared for La Vallière and make use of his information gained to get rid of the young girl, in order to take advantage of her expulsion with all the ladies of the court who might have any pretensions to the King's heart, beginning with Madame and ending with the Queen.

In case the King should show himself obstinate in his desire, he would conceal the disagreeable information, but would let La Vallière know that this information was kept in a secret drawer of the confidant's memory. Thus he would increase his generosity in the eyes of the poor girl and keep her in constant suspense between gratitude and fear, so winning a friend at court interested as an accomplice in making his fortune as well as her own.

As to the day when the bombshell of the past should burst, — supposing it ever did burst, — Saint-Aignan promised him-

self that he would have taken all possible precautions, and that he would pretend entire ignorance to the King.

To La Vallière he would even on that day still be playing the rôle of benefactor.

It was with these ideas developed within half an hour by the fire of covetousness that Saint-Aignan, the best son in the world, as La Fontaine would have said, set out with the well-planned intention of making De Guiche speak, that is, to trouble him in his happiness — a happiness of which for that matter Saint-Aignan was ignorant.

It was one o'clock in the morning when Saint-Aignan saw De Guiche standing motionless, leaning against the trunk of a tree, his eyes fixed on the lighted window, — one o'clock in the morning, that is, the sweetest hour of night, that which painters crown with myrtle and with opening poppies; the hour when eyes are heavy, when the heart palpitates, when the head is dull; an hour which casts upon the day just past a look of regret, an hour which addresses a loving greeting to the new morn.

For De Guiche it was the dawn of ineffable happiness; he would have given a treasure to a beggar had one risen before him, in order that he might not be interrupted in his dreams.

It was just at this hour that Saint-Aignan, ill-advised, — selfishness always counsels wrongly, — touched him on the shoulder just as he was murmuring a word, or rather a name.

"Ah," said he, stupidly. "I was looking for you."

"For me?" said De Guiche with a start.

"Yes; and I find you gazing at the moon. Do you chance to be attacked by a poetic mania, my dear count? Are you composing verses?"

The young man forced his lips to smile, while a thousand conflicting thoughts about Saint-Aignan were struggling in the depths of his heart.

"Perhaps," said he. "But what happy chance —"

"Ah! I see that you misunderstood me."

"How so?"

"I began by telling you I had been looking for you."

"Looking for me?"

"Yes, and I find you in the very act."

"Of what, pray?"

"Why, of singing to Phyllis."

"That is true. I do not deny it," said De Guiche, laughing.

"Yes, my dear count, I was singing to Phyllis."

"That is your right."

"My right?"

"Yes, certainly, you, the intrepid protector of every clever and beautiful woman."

"What the devil have you come to tell me?"

"Well-known truths, I am quite aware. But wait a moment. I am in love."

"You?"

"Yes."

"So much the better, dear count. Tell me about it."

And De Guiche, fearing that Saint-Aignan a little later would perhaps notice the lighted window, took the count's arm and strove to lead him away.

"Oh," said the latter, resisting, "do not take me into those dark woods. It is too damp there. Let us stay in the moonlight, won't you?"

And while yielding to the pressure of De Guiche's arm he remained in the gardens which adjoined the château.

"Come," said De Guiche, resignedly, "lead me where you will and ask me what you please."

"One could not be more complaisant than you."

Then after a moment's silence Saint-Aignan continued:

"Dear count, I want you to tell me something about a certain person whom you have protected."

"And whom you love."

"I will say neither yes nor no. You understand that one does not place his heart where it may be trifled with, and that it is necessary to take measures of security in advance."

"You are right," said De Guiche with a sigh. "The heart is very precious."

"Mine is especially tender and I offer it to you as such."

"Oh, you are well known, count. Well?"

"It is simply a question of Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente."

"Why, my dear Saint-Aignan, I should think you were going mad."

"Why so?"

"I have never protected Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente."

"Bah!"

"Never!"

"Was it not you who gained admission for Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente to Madame's household?"

"Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente — and you ought to know it better than any one else, count — is of sufficiently good family to be wanted and admitted anywhere."

"You are jesting."

"No, upon my word, I do not know what you are driving at."

"So you had nothing to do with her admission?"

"No."

"You do not know her?"

"I saw her for the first time the day she was presented to Madame. So, as I have never been interested in her, as I do not know her, I am not able, my dear count, to give you the information you desire."

And De Guiche made as if to leave his interlocutor.

"No, no!" said Saint-Aignan, "one instant, my dear count; you shall not escape me thus."

"Pardon, but it seems to me that it is time to return to our rooms."

"Yet you will not go in when I — did not meet but found you?"

"My dear count, as long as you have anything to say to me I put myself at your disposal."

"And you do well, I assure you! A half hour more or less will make no difference. Swear that there is nothing evil you can say about her, and that you are not silent because of evil which you might say."

"Oh, I believe the dear child to be as pure as crystal."

"You overwhelm me with joy. And yet I do not wish to seem to you to be as poorly informed as I appear. It is certain that you supplied the princess's household with ladies of honor. A song was even written on this very subject —"

"You know, my dear friend, that verses are made about everything."

"Do you know this one?"

"No; but sing it to me, and I shall then make its acquaintance."

"I cannot tell you how it begins, but I remember how it ends."

"Good! that is at least something."

"Of maids of honor, gentle sir,
De Guiche is named the furnisher."

"The idea is weak and the rhyme poor."

"But what can you expect, my dear fellow? It is neither Racine's nor Molière's. It is La Feuillade's, and a great lord cannot rhyme like a miserable poet."

"It is too bad that you remember only the ending."

"Wait! wait! The beginning of the second couplet is coming to me."

"I am listening."

"He has filled the bird-cage fair,
Montalais and —"

"Odds-fish! *And La Vallière!*" cried De Guiche, impatiently, completely ignorant of where Saint-Aignan was leading him.

"Yes, yes, that's it! *La Vallière!* You've found the rhyme, my dear fellow."

"Great find, I must say."

"*Montalais and La Vallière!* that's it. These are the two young girls in whom you are interested!" and Saint-Aignan began to laugh.

"And you do not find Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente in the song?" said De Guiche.

"No, indeed."

"Are you satisfied, then?"

"Certainly. But I find Montalais there," said Saint-Aignan, still laughing.

"Oh, you will find her everywhere. She is a very restless young lady."

"Do you know her?"

"Indirectly. She was the *protégée* of a certain Malicorne who is interested in Manicamp. Manicamp made me ask for the position of maid of honor for Montalais in Madame's household and for a position for Malicorne in Monsieur's. I did so. You know very well that I have a weakness for that fellow Manicamp."

"And you obtained your request?"

"For Montalais, yes. For Malicorne, yes and no. As yet he is only on trial. Is that all you want to know?"

"The rhyme is left."

"What rhyme?"

"The rhyme you found."

"*La Vallière?*"

"Yes."

And Saint-Aignan began to laugh again, a laugh which greatly irritated De Guiche.

"Well," said the latter, "I had her admitted to Madame's household, it is true."

"Ah!" said Saint-Aignan.

"But," continued De Guiche in his coolest manner, "you would make me very happy, dear count, if you did not joke about that name. Mademoiselle la Baume le Blanc de la Vallière is a very dignified young lady."

"Very dignified?"

"Yes."

"But you have not heard the latest report," cried Saint-Aignan.

"No, and moreover you would do me a favor, my dear count, by keeping this report to yourself, and to those who are circulating it."

"Ah, bah! you take the thing seriously, then?"

"Yes, Mademoiselle de la Vallière is loved by one of my best friends."

Saint-Aignan gave a start.

"Oh, ho!" said he.

"Yes, count," continued De Guiche. "Consequently, you, who are the most courtly man of France, can understand that I cannot allow my friend to be placed in a ridiculous position."

"Oh, perfectly!"

And Saint-Aignan bit his nails, half in anger, half in baffled curiosity.

De Guiche made him a low bow.

"You send me away," said Saint-Aignan, consumed with a desire to know the name of the friend.

"Not at all, my dear fellow. I am going to finish my lines to Phyllis."

"And these lines?"

"Are a quatrain. You understand, do you not, that a quatrain is sacred?"

"Yes, indeed."

"And since out of the four lines of which it is composed there still remain three and a half to be made, I need all my wits."

"I quite understand. Good-night, count."

"Good-night."

"By the way —"

"What?"

"Are you good at rhyming?"

"Tremendously."

"Will you have finished your three lines and a half by to-morrow morning?"

"I hope so."

"Well, till to-morrow, then."

"Till to-morrow."

Saint-Aignan was forced to accept his dismissal; he did so, and disappeared behind the hedge.

Their conversation had led De Guiche and Saint-Aignan quite a distance from the château.

Every mathematician, every poet, and every dreamer has his amusements. On leaving De Guiche Saint-Aignan found himself then at the edge of the grove in the place where the out-buildings began, and where, behind great thickets of acacias and chestnut-trees twisting their branches beneath masses of clematis and young vines, the wall rose which separates the wood from the court-yard.

Left alone, Saint-Aignan took the path to these buildings. De Guiche turned in the opposite direction. The one returned, therefore, to the gardens; the other went towards the walls.

Saint-Aignan walked under an impenetrable arch of mountain ash, lilacs, and gigantic hawthorns; on soft sand, lost in the shadow, his footsteps deadened by the moss.

He was planning a revenge which seemed to him difficult to execute. He was checkmated, as Tallement des Réaux would have said, by his failure to learn more about La Vallière, in spite of the tact he had used in leading the conversation to her.

Suddenly the murmur of voices reached him, whispers like a woman's, complaints mingled with entreaties, smothered laughter, sighs, half-stifled exclamations; but through all the woman's voice dominated.

Saint-Aignan stopped and looked about him; he saw with surprise that the voices came not from below, but from the trees overhead.

As he glided along he raised his head and saw at the top of the wall a woman perched on a ladder in deep conversation with a man seated in a tree. His head could be seen, but his body was lost in the shadow of the chestnut-tree.

The woman was on this side of the wall, the man on that.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE LABYRINTH.

SAINT-AIGNAN had been seeking for information only and he had stumbled upon an adventure. That was luck.

Curious to know why and about what this man and this woman were talking at such an hour and in such a strange position, Saint-Aignan crouched down and went almost to the rounds of the ladder. Then making himself as comfortable as possible he leaned against a tree and listened. He heard the following dialogue.

The woman was speaking.

"Really, M. Manicamp," said she, in a voice which in the midst of the reproaches she was uttering preserved a singular accent of coquetry, "really you are dreadfully indiscreet! We cannot talk long like this without being caught."

"That's very likely," interrupted the man in the calmest and coolest of tones.

"Well, what would people say then? Oh! if any one saw me I declare I should die of shame."

"Oh! that would be very childish. I do not believe you capable of it."

"There might be some excuse had there been anything between us. But to injure myself gratuitously — really that would be foolish of me. Good-night, M. de Manicamp."

"Good! I know the man. Now I must see the woman," said Saint-Aignan, watching on the rounds of the ladder two little feet encased in elegant blue satin slippers and flesh-colored stockings.

"Oh, come, come, for pity's sake, my dear Montalais," cried Manicamp, "do not go away! The devil! I have many things of the greatest importance to say to you."

"Montalais!" said Saint-Aignan to himself; "one of the three! Each had her adventure, only it seemed to me that this one's hero was Malicorne and not Manicamp."

At her companion's appeal, Montalais stopped in the middle of her descent. The unfortunate Manicamp could then be seen climbing from branch to branch of the chestnut-tree, either to improve his position or to overcome the fatigue of his inconvenient attitude.

"Come," said he, "listen to me! You know very well, I hope, that I have no evil intentions."

"Of course! But why did you write me that letter rousing my gratitude? Why did you ask me for this interview at such an hour and in such a place?"

"I roused your gratitude by recalling to you the fact that it was I who had been the means of your entering Madame's service, because, being greatly desirous of the interview which you have been good enough to accord me, I used, in order to obtain it, the means which seemed to be the surest. Why did I appoint such an hour and such a place? It was because the hour seemed to me the safest and the place solitary. Moreover, I had to question you on subjects which require both discretion and solitude."

"M. de Manicamp!"

"But everything honorable, mademoiselle."

"M. de Manicamp, I think it would be more fitting for me to retire."

"Listen to me or I will jump from my nest into yours; and take care how you defy me, for just at present there is a branch in my way which provokes me exceedingly. Do not imitate this branch, but listen to me."

"I will consent to listen to you, but be brief, for if a branch is annoying you, the round of a ladder is going through the soles of my feet. My shoes are worn through, I warn you."

"Do me the kindness to give me your hand, mademoiselle."

"Why?"

"Give it to me."

"Here it is. But what are you going to do?"

"I am going to draw you towards me."

"But what for? You certainly do not expect me to join you in your tree?"

"No, but I want you to sit on the wall. There! so! the place is wide and comfortable, and I would give a good deal to be sitting beside you."

"No; you are very well where you are, and we should be seen."

"Do you think so?" asked Manicamp in an insinuating tone.

"I am sure of it."

"Very well; I will remain in my tree, although I could not be more uncomfortable."

"M. Manicamp, we are wandering from the subject."

"That is true."

"You wrote to me?"

"I did."

"Why did you write?"

"Picture to yourself that to-day at two o'clock De Guiche left."

"Well?"

"Seeing him go I followed him, as is my habit."

"I see that clearly enough, since you are here now."

"Wait a moment. You know, do you not, that this poor De Guiche is up to his neck in disgrace?"

"Alas, yes!"

"It was, therefore, the height of imprudence for him to come to Fontainebleau to see those who had exiled him in Paris, and especially those from whom he had been separated."

"You reason like the late Pythagoras, M. Manicamp."

"Moreover, De Guiche is as obstinate as any lover, therefore he would not listen to any of my remonstrances. I begged him! I besought him! He would listen to nothing — ah, the devil!"

"What is the matter?"

"I beg your pardon, but this cursed branch which I have already had the honor of mentioning has torn a part of my clothes."

"It is dark," replied Montalais, laughing, "so let us continue, M. Manicamp."

"De Guiche therefore set off on horseback as fast as he could, and I followed him at a slower rate. You understand that to throw one's self into the water with a friend, and at the same rapid rate as he throws himself, is the act of a fool or of a madman. I therefore let De Guiche go on in advance and I went my way with the slowest of wisdom, persuaded as I was that the unfortunate man would not be received, or if he were, that he would ride away at the first cross word and that I should see him returning much faster than he went, without my having gone farther than Ris or Melun — and that was far enough, you will admit, since it is eleven leagues there and as many back."

Montalais shrugged her shoulders.

"Laugh as much as you please, mademoiselle, but if instead of being comfortably seated on the top of a wall as you are, you were seated on a branch as if on horseback, you would, like Augustus, aspire to descend."

"A little patience, my dear M. Manicamp. A moment is soon over; you were saying, then, that you had gone beyond Ris and Melun?"

"Yes, I had gone beyond Ris and Melun: I continued to go on and on, more and more astonished at not seeing him return, until finally here I am at Fontainebleau. I look and inquire everywhere for De Guiche; no one has seen him, no one has spoken to him in the town; he arrived at full gallop entered the château, and disappeared. Since eight o'clock this evening I have been at Fontainebleau asking for De Guiche everywhere, but no De Guiche! I am dying of anxiety. You understand that I have not been throwing myself into the lions' den by entering the château as my imprudent friend has done; I came straight to the servants' quarters and succeeded in getting a letter to you. Now, mademoiselle, in heaven's name, relieve me of my anxiety."

"That will not be difficult, my dear M. Manicamp; your friend De Guiche has been admirably received."

"Bah!"

"The King smiled on him."

"The King, who exiled him!"

"Madame also smiled on him; Monsieur seems to like him better than ever."

"Ah!" said Manicamp, "that explains how and why he has remained. And he has not spoken of me?"

"Not a word."

"That is evil of him. What is he doing now?"

"Sleeping, in all probability. Or if not sleeping, dreaming."

"And what have they been doing all the evening?"

"Dancing."

"The famous ballet? How was De Guiche?"

"Superb!"

"Dear fellow! Now forgive me, mademoiselle, but all that remains for me to do is to join you over there."

"What do you mean?"

"You see, I do not suppose that they would open the door of the château to me at this hour, and as to sleeping on this

branch I might be willing to do it, but I vow it would be impossible for any animal except a popinjay."

"But, M. Manicamp, I cannot admit a man over the wall like that."

"Two, mademoiselle," said a second voice, but in so timid a tone that it was easily seen that its owner realized all the impropriety of such a request.

"Good Heaven!" cried Montalais, trying to see as far as the foot of the tree. "Who is speaking to me?"

"I, mademoiselle!"

"Who are you?"

"Malicorne, your very humble servant." And as he spoke Malicorne raised himself from the ground to the very lowest branches, and from them to the top of the wall.

"M. Malicorne! Great goodness! But you are both of you mad!"

"How do you do, mademoiselle?" said Malicorne, with great politeness.

"This was all I needed," cried Montalais in despair.

"Yes, mademoiselle," murmured Malicorne, "do not be so harsh, I beg of you."

"And then, mademoiselle," said Manicamp, "we are your friends, and no one desires the death of her friends. To let us pass the night where we are is to condemn us to death."

"Oh," said Montalais, "M. Malicorne is robust. He will not die for having passed a night under the stars."

"Mademoiselle!"

"It will be a just punishment for his escapade."

"Very well. Let Malicorne arrange with you as best he can. I go over!" said Manicamp. And bending the famous branch which he had derided, he succeeded, by the aid of his hands and feet, in seating himself by the side of Montalais, who tried to push him back, while he tried to maintain his position. This struggle, which lasted several moments, had its picturesque side, of which M. de Saint-Aignan took full account.

But Manicamp came out ahead. Master of the ladder, he placed his foot on it, then offered his hand gallantly to his enemy.

Meanwhile Malicorne installed himself in the chestnut-tree, in the place which had been occupied by Manicamp, promising himself to succeed the latter in the place he now occupied.

Manicamp and Montalais descended a few rounds, Manicamp insisting on his rights and Montalais laughingly defending herself. Then Malicorne's voice was heard entreating:

"Mademoiselle, do not leave me, I beg! My position is insecure and I cannot reach the other side of the wall in safety; if Manicamp tears his clothes, what matter? He has M. de Guiche's; but I shall not have even those of Manicamp, since they will be torn."

"My opinion," said Manicamp, without noticing Malicorne's lamentations, "is that the best thing to do is to go at once and find De Guiche. Later, perhaps, I may not be able to get into his apartments."

"That is my opinion too," replied Montalais, "so go at once, M. Manicamp."

"A thousand thanks! *Au revoir*, mademoiselle," said Manicamp, springing to the ground; "no one is so kind as you."

"M. de Manicamp, your servant; I am now going to get rid of M. Malicorne." Malicorne heaved a sigh.

"Go, go," continued Montalais.

Manicamp went away a few steps, then returned to the foot of the ladder.

"By the way, mademoiselle," said he, "how can one get to M. de Guiche's?"

"Ah! yes, why, nothing easier, you follow the hedge —"

"Yes."

"You reach the place where the paths cross —"

"Well."

"You come to the four paths —"

"Exactly."

"You take one —"

"Which one?"

"The one to the right."

"The one to the right?"

"No, to the left."

"Ah, the devil!"

"No, no, wait a minute —"

"You do not seem very sure. Think again, mademoiselle, I entreat."

"The middle one."

"There are four."

"That is true. All that I know is that one of the four leads straight to Madame's, and that one I know."

"But M. de Guiche is not at Madame's, is he?"

"Certainly not."

"The one that leads to Madame's, then, is useless to me, and I should like to exchange it for that which goes to M. de Guiche's."

"Yes, assuredly. I know that one too; but as to indicating it from here, it is impossible."

"Well, mademoiselle, suppose that I have found that fortunate path."

"In that case you are at your journey's end."

"Very good."

"Yes, you have only to cross the labyrinth."

"Only that? The deuce! There is a labyrinth, then?"

"Complicated enough, too; even in the daytime one sometimes is deceived; there are turnings and windings without end; in the first place you must take three turns to the right, then two to the left, then one—is it one or two? Wait a moment! Well, on leaving the labyrinth you find an avenue of sycamores, and this leads straight to the pavilion in which M. de Guiche has his rooms."

"Mademoiselle," said Manicamp, "that is an admirable explanation, and I have not the slightest doubt but that guided by it I should lose myself at once. Consequently I have a slight favor to ask of you."

"What is it?"

"That you will offer me your arm, and guide me yourself like another—like another—I know my mythology, mademoiselle, but important events have made me forget it. Come, then, I beg of you."

"And I," cried Malicorne, "am to be abandoned, then?"

"Why, monsieur, it is impossible!" said Montalais to Manicamp; "I might be seen with you at such an hour, and imagine what would be said of me."

"Your own conscience would acquit you, mademoiselle," said Manicamp, sententiously.

"Impossible, monsieur, impossible!"

"In that case let me help Malicorne to descend; he is a very intelligent fellow, and has a keen scent; he will guide me, and if we are lost, we will both be lost and will save each other. If we are met, two of us will look as though we had a matter of business on hand, while alone I should look either like a lover or a robber. Come, Malicorne, here is the ladder."

"M. Malicorne," cried Montalais, "I forbid you to leave your tree, under pain of my anger."

Malicorne had already stretched one of his legs towards the top of the wall, and was sadly drawing it back when Manicamp said in a low tone:

"Hush!"

"What is it?" said Montalais.

"I hear steps."

"Oh, heavens!"

In fact the suspected steps became a real noise, the foliage parted, and Saint-Aignan appeared, with smiling eyes and hand upraised, surprising every one in the various positions: Malicorne on his tree, his neck stretched out; Montalais on her ladder, clinging to its rounds; Manicamp on the ground, his foot advanced ready to set out.

"Good evening, Manicamp," said the count, "welcome, my friend; we missed you this evening, and every one asked for you. Mademoiselle de Montalais, your — very humble servant!"

Montalais blushed.

"Great goodness!" she stammered, hiding her face in her hands.

"Mademoiselle," said Saint-Aignan, "reassure yourself. I know you are innocent, and I shall give a good account of you. Manicamp, follow me. Hedge, cross-paths, and labyrinth, I know them all; I will be your Ariadne. There! your mythological name is found!"

"True, count; I thank you."

"But at the same time, count," said Montalais, "take away M. Malicorne too."

"No, no," said Malicorne, "M. Manicamp has talked with you as much as he pleased; now it is my turn, if you please, mademoiselle; I have a thousand things to say to you concerning our future."

"You hear," said the count, laughing; "stay with him, mademoiselle. Do you not know that this is a night for secrets?"

And taking Manicamp's arm, the count led him rapidly away in the direction of the road Montalais knew so well, and had indicated so poorly.

Montalais followed them with her eyes as long as they could be seen.

CHAPTER XXXI.

HOW MALICORNE HAD BEEN TURNED OUT OF THE HÔTEL
OF THE BEAU PAON.

WHILE Montalais' eyes were following the count and Manicamp, Malicorne had taken advantage of the young girl's distraction to acquire a more comfortable position.

When she turned around she immediately noticed this change of position. Malicorne was seated like a monkey, his back against the wall, his feet on the first round of the ladder.

The wild vine and honeysuckle leaves crowned his head as though he were a faun; the twisted ivy vine well represented the cloven feet.

As for Montalais, there was nothing to prevent one from taking her for a dryad accomplice.

"So," said she, ascending a round, "have you made me wretched enough, and have you persecuted me sufficiently, tyrant that you are?"

"I," said Malicorne, "I, a tyrant?"

"Yes; you compromise me constantly, M. Malicorne; you are a monster of wickedness."

"I?"

"What have you to do at Fontainebleau? Tell me; is not your home in Orléans?"

"What am I doing here, you ask? Why, seeing you."

"Truly, a necessity."

"Not for you, perhaps, mademoiselle, but certainly for me. As for my home, you well know that I have given it up, and that in future I have no other home than yours. So, your home being at present at Fontainebleau, to Fontainebleau I have come."

Montalais shrugged her shoulders.

"You wished to see me, did you not?"

"Certainly."

"Well, you have seen me, you are satisfied; so now go."

"Oh, no," said Malicorne.

"Why not?"

"I did not come merely to see you; I came to talk with you."

"Well, we can talk later, and in another place."

"Later! God alone knows if I shall meet you later in another place! We shall never find a more favorable one than this."

"But I cannot this evening, or at the present moment."

"Why not?"

"Because a thousand things have happened this evening."

"Well, then, my affair will make a thousand and one."

"No, no; Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente is waiting for me in our room for a communication of the greatest importance."

"Has she been waiting long?"

"For an hour at least."

"Then," said Malicorne, calmly, "she can wait a few minutes longer."

"M. Malicorne," said Montalais, "you forget yourself."

"You mean that you forget me, mademoiselle, and that I am growing impatient at the rôle you are making me play here. By heaven, mademoiselle, for a week past I have been prowling about among you all, without your having once deigned to see where I was."

"You have been prowling about here for a week?"

"Like a wolf. Scorched by the fireworks, which have singed two of my wigs, drenched in the osiers by the evening dampness or the spray from the fountains, always hungry, always tired to death, with the prospect of a wall, or the necessity of perhaps scaling it. Zounds! that is no fate, mademoiselle, for one who is neither a squirrel nor a salamander nor an otter; and since you push inhumanity to the point of wishing me to renounce my condition of a man, I declare that I am a man, by all that's holy, and a man I shall remain, unless by superior orders."

"Well, come, what do you wish, what do you desire, what do you demand?" said Montalais, submissively.

"Are you going to tell me that you did not know I was at Fontainebleau?"

"I —"

"Be honest."

"I suspected it."

"Well, during the week could you not have seen me at least once a day?"

"I was always prevented, M. Malicorne."

"Fiddlesticks!"

"Ask my girl friends, if you do not believe me."

"I never ask an explanation for a thing I know better than any one else."

"Calm yourself, M. Malicorne, that will change."

"It must."

"You know that whether you are seen or not I am thinking of you," said Montalais, with her coaxing tone.

"Oh, you think of me —"

"On my word of honor."

"And nothing new?"

"About what?"

"About my post in Monsieur's household."

"Ah, my dear M. Malicorne, no one has approached his royal Highness during the past few days."

"And now?"

"Now it is a different thing; since yesterday. He has not been jealous since yesterday."

"Bah! and how did he get over his jealousy?"

"He had a diversion."

"Tell me about it."

"A report was spread that the King had noticed another woman, and Monsieur became calm at once."

"Who spread the report?"

Montalais lowered her voice.

"Between ourselves," said she, "I think that Madame and the King came to an understanding."

"Ah," said Malicorne, "that was the only way to do it; but M. de Guiche, poor fellow!"

"Oh, he is completely ousted."

"Have they written to each other?"

"Of course not! I have not seen either one of them with a pen for eight days."

"How are you with Madame?"

"On the best of terms."

"And with the King?"

"The King smiles at me when I pass."

"Good! Now what woman have the two lovers chosen to serve as their screen?"

"La Vallière."

"Oh, poor girl! But that must be prevented, my dear."

"Why?"

"Because if M. Raoul de Bragelonne were to suspect it he would kill either her or himself."

"Raoul! That good Raoul! Do you think so?"

"Women pretend to understand passion," said Malicorne, "and women do not even know how to read their own thoughts or their own hearts. Well, I tell you that M. de Bragelonne loves La Vallière to such a degree that if she deceived him he would kill either her or himself."

"The King is there to defend her," said Montalais.

"The King!" exclaimed Malicorne.

"Yes."

"Well, Raoul would kill the King as he would a Dutch dragoon."

"Good gracious!" said Montalais, "why, you are mad, M. Malicorne!"

"On the contrary, everything I am saying is serious, my dear; and moreover, I know one thing."

"What is that?"

"That I shall warn Raoul quietly of the trick."

"Hush, you wretched man!" said Montalais, ascending another round of the ladder so as to approach Malicorne more closely. "Do not open your lips to this poor Bragelonne."

"Why not?"

"Because as yet you know nothing."

"What is the rest, then?"

"Well, this evening — is any one listening?"

"No."

"This evening under the royal oak La Vallière said aloud and quite innocently these words: 'I cannot imagine that after having seen the King one can ever love any one else.'"

Malicorne gave a start.

"Good God!" said he, "she said that? Wretched girl!"

"Word for word."

"And she really thinks it?"

"La Vallière always thinks what she says."

"That cries for vengeance! Why, women are serpents!" said Malicorne.

"Calm yourself, my dear Malicorne."

"No. Let us cut the evil at its root. Let us warn Raoul; there is still time."

"Bungler! On the contrary, there is not time," replied Montalais.

"Why not?"

"La Vallière's remark —"

"Yes?"

"Her speech about the King —"

"Well?"

"Well, it reached him."

"The King knows it? It was told him?"

"The King overheard it."

"*Ohimé!* as M. le Cardinal used to say."

"The King was hidden in a clump of bushes behind the royal oak."

"The result is," said Malicorne, "that after this the plan of the King and Madame will run on wheels, passing over the body of poor Bragelonne."

"True."

"It is frightful!"

"Exactly."

"Well," said Malicorne, after a moment of silent meditation, "do not let us interpose our persons between a thick oak and a great King. We should be crushed, my dear."

"That is what I meant to tell you."

"Let us think of ourselves."

"That was my own idea."

"Open your beautiful eyes, then."

"And you your big ears."

"Raise your little mouth for a good-sized kiss."

"Here!" said Montalais, who paid at once in ringing coin.

"Now let us see. Here is M. de Guiche, who loves Madame. There La Vallière, who loves the King. Here the King, who loves Madame and La Vallière. There Monsieur, who loves no one but himself. Amongst all these loves an imbecile would make his fortune. All the more for sensible people like ourselves to do so."

"There you are again with your dreams."

"You mean with my realities. Let yourself be led by me, my love; you have not been so badly off up to now, have you?"

"No."

"Well, the future will not fall short of the past. Only, since every one here is thinking of himself, let us do the same."

"That is only right."

"Just of ourselves alone."

"Yes."

"An offensive and defensive alliance!"

"I am ready to swear to it."

"Give me your hand. That's it! All for Malicorne."

"All for Malicorne!"

"All for Montalais!" replied Malicorne, extending his hand in turn.

"Now what must we do?"

"Keep eyes and ears open. Collect weapons against others. Never let any lie about, which might be used against ourselves."

"Agreed."

"Settled."

"Sworn to! And now that the compact is signed, good-bye."

"Good-bye?"

"Certainly. Return to your inn."

"To my inn?"

"Yes. Are you not lodging in the inn of the Beau Paon?"

"Montalais! Montalais! You see you knew very well that I was in Fontainebleau."

"What does that prove except that I thought about you more than you deserve, ungrateful wretch?"

"Humph!"

"So go back to the Beau Paon."

"Well, that's just it!"

"What?"

"That is impossible."

"Did you not have a room there?"

"Yes; but I no longer have one."

"You no longer have one? Who took it away?"

"A little while ago I was returning from running after you, and reached my hotel out of breath, when I saw four peasants carrying a litter on which lay a sick monk."

"A monk?"

"Yes; an old gray-bearded Franciscan. As I was looking at him they entered the inn. I followed as they mounted the stairs, and when I reached the top I saw that they were taking him into my room."

"Into your room?"

"Yes, into my room. I thought it must be a mistake, so I called the host, who told me that the room had been rented to me for eight days and was rented to the Franciscan for the ninth."

"Oh!"

"That's just what I said. I did even more. I almost grew angry. I went up the stairs again. I spoke to the Franciscan himself. I tried to convince him of the impropriety of his proceeding, but the monk, dying as he seemed, raised himself on his elbow, fixed on me two blazing eyes and, in a voice which would admirably have commanded a cavalry charge, said: 'Throw this rascal out of the door.' This was instantly done by the host and the four porters, who forced me to descend the stairs somewhat more speedily than was agreeable. That is how it happens, my dear, that I have no shelter."

"But who is this Franciscan?" demanded Montalais. "Is he a general?"

"That was the very title I thought was given him by one of the porters, who spoke in a low tone."

"So that —" said Montalais.

"So that I have no room, no inn, no shelter. And I am as determined as my friend Manicamp was just now not to sleep out of doors."

"What is to be done?" cried Montalais.

"That's just it!" said Malicorne.

"Nothing easier!" said a third voice.

Montalais and Malicorne uttered a simultaneous cry.

Saint-Aignan appeared.

"Dear M. Malicorne," said he, "a fortunate accident brings me back to extricate you from your plight. I can offer you a room with me, and that I promise you no Franciscan can take away. As to you, my dear mademoiselle, rest easy. I already know Mademoiselle de la Vallière's secret and that of Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente. You have just had the kindness to confide yours to me, for which I thank you. I can keep three quite as well as one."

Malicorne and Montalais looked at each other like two scholars caught robbing an orchard; but as Malicorne saw a great advantage in the proposition just made him he gave Montalais a resigned nod, which she returned.

Then Malicorne descended the ladder round by round, reflecting at every step on the means of obtaining bit by bit from Saint-Aignan how much he knew about the talked-of secret.

Montalais had already darted away like a hind, and neither cross-road nor labyrinth could lead her astray.

As for Saint-Aignan, he carried Malicorne away to his rooms

and paid him a thousand attentions, enchanted as he was to have in hand the two men who — supposing that De Guiche remained silent — could best inform him as to the maids of honor.

CHAPTER XXXII.

WHAT ACTUALLY HAPPENED IN THE INN OF THE BEAU PAON.

IN the first place let us give our reader some details about the inn of the Beau Paon; we will then pass on to a description of the travellers lodging therein.

The inn of the Beau Paon, like every other inn, owed its name to its sign. This sign represented a peacock spreading its tail. But in imitation of certain painters who gave the face of a handsome boy to the serpent who tempted Eve, the sign painters had given to the peacock the face of a woman.

This inn, an epigram against that half of the human race which makes life delightful, as M. Legouvé says, was situated at Fontainebleau in the first side street to the left which, coming from Paris, divides the great artery that in itself constitutes the entire town of Fontainebleau. The side street was then called the Rue de Lyon, no doubt because geographically it led in the direction of the second capitol of the kingdom.

On the street were two buildings occupied by tradespeople, and separated from each other by large gardens bordered with hedges.

Apparently, however, there were three buildings in the street. Let us explain how, in spite of appearances, there were but two.

The inn of the Beau Paon had its principal front on the highway, but on the Rue de Lyon there were two buildings divided by courtyards, including lodges suitable for receiving travellers either on foot or horseback, or even in carriages; and for supplying not only lodgings and board, but accommodations for exercise and opportunities of solitude for the wealthiest courtiers, when after some snub at court they desired to shut themselves up alone to swallow the affront or plan revenge.

From the windows of this part of the building travellers could see first the street with its grass growing between the pavements, which it was gradually forcing apart; then the beautiful hedges of elder and hawthorn which embraced as between two green flowery areas the tradespeople's houses to which we have referred; finally in the space between these houses, forming the groundwork of the picture and standing like an impassable barrier, a thick line of trees with dense foliage, advance sentinels of the vast forest which extends in front of Fontainebleau.

One could, therefore, by having a corner apartment, both see and hear the passers-by, and the fêtes on the highway from Paris, and could also get a glimpse of the quiet country by the Rue de Lyon. This did not consider that in cases of necessity at the moment any one knocked at the door of the Rue de Paris, one could escape by the little door on the Rue de Lyon, and going along by the gardens of the tradespeople's houses gain the outskirts of the forest.

Malicorne, who it will be remembered was the first to speak to us of this inn of the Beau Paon, while deploring his expulsion therefrom, absorbed in his own affairs, did not begin to tell Montalais all that there was to be told about this curious inn.

We shall therefore try to rectify this omission.

For instance, Malicorne had neglected to say how he had entered the inn of the Beau Paon. Besides, with the exception of the Franciscan whom he had mentioned, he had said nothing of the travellers who were lodging there.

The manner in which they had entered, the way they lived, the difficulty any but privileged travellers had in entering the hotel without a password and in remaining there without having taken certain precautions, must certainly have struck and, we venture to say, did strike Malicorne.

But as we have already said, Malicorne was so taken up with personal affairs as to notice nothing else.

In fact, all of the apartments of the inn of the Beau Paon were secured and retained by foreigners who seldom went out, were of quaint demeanor, bore thoughtful faces, and who were all strangers to Malicorne.

All these travellers had arrived at the hotel after his own arrival, and each had entered by a sort of password which at first had set Malicorne to thinking; but he was soon informed

that the host explained this sort of surveillance by saying that the town, full as it was of rich lords, must also be full of clever and active pickpockets.

It was necessary, therefore, for the reputation of an honest house like the Beau Paon to secure its lodgers against robbery.

Malicorne occasionally asked himself while he was thinking matters over in his own mind, and reflecting upon his position in the Beau Paon, why he had been allowed to enter, when since his arrival he had seen admission refused to so many others.

He asked himself also why when Manicamp, who in his opinion was a lord, respected by every one, wished to put up his horse at the Beau Paon, both horse and rider had been dismissed with a most positive *Nescio Vos*.

It was, therefore, for Malicorne a problem which, occupied as he was with the offices of love and ambition, he had not tried to solve. Had he wished to do so we should, in spite of the intelligence we have attributed to him, hardly dare to say he would have succeeded.

A few words will prove to the reader that no one but *Œdipus* himself could solve such a problem.

During eight days seven travellers had entered the inn, all having arrived the day after the fortunate one on which Malicorne had fixed his choice on the Beau Paon.

These seven persons, who came with suitable retinues, were:

A brigadier in the German army, his secretary, his physician, three servants, seven horses. This brigadier was the Baron von Westpur.

A Spanish cardinal with two nephews, two secretaries, an officer of his household, and twelve horses. The cardinal's name was Monseigneur Herrebia.

A wealthy merchant of Bremen with his servant and two horses. This merchant was called Meinheer Bonstett.

A Venetian senator, with his wife and daughter, both very beautiful. They addressed this senator as *il Signor Marini*.

A Scotch laird by the name of MacCumnor, with seven Highlanders of his clan, all on foot.

An Austrian from Vienna without title or coat-of-arms, who arrived in his carriage. He had a good deal in him of the priest, a little of the soldier, and was called "councillor."

Finally a Flemish lady with a lackey, a lady's maid, and a companion, a great train of servants, great display, great equipages. She was called "the Flemish lady."

All these travellers had arrived the same day, as we have said; yet their arrival caused no confusion in the inn, no crowding in the street; their rooms had been secured in advance by their couriers or secretaries, who had arrived the evening before or that very morning.

Malicorne, who had come the previous day, riding a poor horse and carrying a slender bag, had announced to the host that he was the friend of a nobleman who was interested in seeing the fêtes, and who was to arrive almost immediately.

At these words the landlord had smiled as if he were well acquainted with either Malicorne or his friend, the nobleman, and had said to him, "Monsieur, choose whatever room suits you, since you are the first comer." All this with that significant obsequiousness of innkeepers which means: "Be easy, monsieur; we know with whom we have to deal, and you will be treated accordingly."

These words and the gesture which accompanied them had seemed to Malicorne friendly, but somewhat obscure. Since he did not wish to be put to great expense, and since if he had asked for a small room he would no doubt have been refused on account of his lack of importance, he hastened to make the most of the innkeeper's words, and so to deceive him by his own cleverness.

Therefore, smiling like a man for whom people always do exactly what they should, he said:

"Mine host, I will take the best and most cheerful room you have."

"With a stable?"

"With a stable."

"For what day?"

"At once, if that is possible."

"Very good."

"Only," added Malicorne, hastily, "I shall not occupy the large room at once."

"Good!" said the host, with a knowing look.

"Certain reasons which you will understand later force me to take the small room at my own expense."

"Yes, yes," said the host.

"My friend, when he arrives, will occupy the large apartment, and naturally, as it will be his, he will settle for it himself."

"Very good," said the host; "that was understood."

"Was understood?"

"Word for word."

"That's extraordinary," murmured Malicorne. "So you understand?"

"Yes."

"That is all that is necessary. Now that you understand — for you do, don't you?"

"Perfectly."

"Well, show me to my room."

The landlord of the Beau Paon, cap in hand, preceded Malicorne.

Malicorne installed himself in his room and was greatly surprised to see the host every time he came up or went down give him one of those winks which indicate perfect understanding between two people.

"There is some mistake here," said Malicorne to himself, "but until it is cleared up the best I can do is to take advantage of it."

And he darted from his room like a hunting dog, scenting news and court gossip, getting himself burned here and drenched there, as he had said to Mademoiselle de Montalais.

The day after his installation he had seen the seven travellers arrive one after the other, filling the whole of the inn.

At sight of all those people, all those equipages, all that retinue, Malicorne rubbed his hands, thinking that, one day later, he would have found no bed on which to rest on his return from his explorations.

After all the strangers were installed the host entered his room and with his customary graciousness said, "My dear monsieur, the large room on the third floor is still left for you, you know?"

"Certainly I know it."

"And I am making you a veritable present."

"Thanks."

"So that when your friend arrives —"

"Well?"

"Well, he will be pleased with me; unless he is hard to please."

"Pardon me. Will you permit me to say a few words about my friend?"

"Certainly; you are surely the master."

"He was to have come, as you know —"

"And he is still coming."

"He may have changed his mind."

"No."

"You are sure?"

"Sure."

"Because in case you have any doubt —"

"Well?"

"I want to say that I cannot guarantee his coming."

"But he told you —"

"Certainly he told me. But you know, 'Man proposes and God disposes.' '*Verba volant, scripta manent.*'"

"Which means?"

"That words fly away, but writing remains. And as he did not write to me, but merely spoke, I authorize you, but do not ask you — you see it's rather embarrassing —"

"What do you authorize me to do?"

"The deuce! — to rent his apartment if you find a good tenant."

"I?"

"Yes, you."

"Never, monsieur, never would I do such a thing. He may not have written to you —"

"No."

"But he wrote to me."

"Ah!"

"Yes."

"In what terms? Let us see if his letter accords with what he said to me."

"These are almost his words:

"To the Landlord of the Inn of the Beau Paon:

"You have probably been informed of the meeting to be held in your inn by some people of importance. I shall be among those who are to meet at Fontainebleau. Keep a small room for a friend who will arrive either before or after me —"

"You are this friend, are you not?" said the landlord, interrupting his reading.

Malicorne bowed modestly.

The landlord went on :

"— and a large apartment for myself. *The latter is my own affair; but I desire the price of the small room to be moderate, as it is intended for a poor devil!*"

"That is still you, is it not?" said the host.

"Yes, certainly," said Malicorne.

"Then we agree; your friend will settle for his room and you for yours."

"May I be broken alive on the wheel," said Malicorne to himself, "if I understand anything at all of this!"

Then aloud :

"But tell me, were you satisfied with the name?"

"What name?"

"The name at the end of the letter. Does it guarantee everything?"

"I was going to ask you," said the landlord.

"What! was not the letter signed?"

"No," said the landlord, opening his eyes, full of mystery and curiosity.

"In that case," said Malicorne, imitating the gesture and mysterious look, "if it was not signed —"

"Well?"

"You understand that he must have had his reasons for that?"

"No doubt."

"And that I as his friend, his confidant, could not betray his incognito."

"That is true, monsieur," replied the host, "nor shall I insist on your doing so."

"I appreciate your delicacy. As for me, as my friend says, my room is separate. Let us understand that."

"Monsieur, it is understood."

"Good accounts, you know, make good friends. So let us settle."

"There is no hurry."

"Nevertheless, let us settle the bill. Room, board for myself and horse. How much per day?"

"Four livres, monsieur."

"That makes twelve livres for the three last days?"

"Twelve livres, monsieur."

"Here they are."

"But, monsieur, of what use to settle at once?"

"Because," said Malicorne, lowering his voice, and resuming his mysterious air, as he saw it had been successful; "because if I should have to leave suddenly, to decamp at any moment, my bill would be paid."

"You are right, monsieur."

"So I may feel at home?"

"Certainly."

"Very good. Adieu."

The landlord withdrew.

Left alone, Malicorne reasoned as follows:

"No one but M. de Guiche or Manicamp could have written to the landlord — M. de Guiche because he wanted a lodging outside of the court, in case of success or failure; Manicamp because he may have been entrusted with that commission by M. de Guiche.

"This is how M. de Guiche or Manicamp must have argued: The large apartment, in which to receive in a suitable fashion a lady thickly veiled, reserving to the aforesaid lady a double exit on the almost deserted street ending at the forest.

"The small room could be used for the time being to hide Manicamp, M. de Guiche's confidant and vigilant doorkeeper, or M. de Guiche himself, playing at the same time for greater safety, the rôle of master and that of confidant.

"But this meeting which was to take place, which in fact has taken place in the hotel? They are no doubt people who are to be presented to the King.

"But the poor devil for whom the room is intended? A ruse in order the better to hide De Guiche or Manicamp.

"If it be so, as is probable, there is only half the mischief done, and between Manicamp and Malicorne there is nothing but a purse."

After this reasoning Malicorne had slept soundly, leaving the seven foreigners to occupy and to walk up and down, in every sense of the word, the seven rooms in the inn of the Beau Paon.

When nothing troubled him at court, when he was tired from excursions and investigations, or weary from writing notes which he never found an opportunity of delivering to their address, he returned to his comfortable little room, and leaning on the balcony, which was brightened by nasturtiums and white pinks, began to think over the strange travellers for

whom Fontainebleau seemed to have no lights, no amusements, no fêtes.

Things lasted thus until the seventh day, a day of which, as of the night, we have given the full details in the preceding chapter.

That night at about one o'clock Malicorne was taking the fresh air at his window, when Manicamp appeared on horseback, his head in the air, with thoughtful and weary look.

"Good!" said Malicorne to himself, recognizing him at first glance, "there is my man, who has come to the possession of his room, that is, my room."

And he called to Manicamp.

The latter raised his head and recognized Malicorne.

"Gad!" said the former, his face clearing; "welcome, Malicorne! I have been riding through Fontainebleau seeking three things which I cannot find — De Guiche, a room, and a stable."

"As for M. de Guiche, I can give you neither good nor bad news, since I have not seen him; but as for a room and a stable, that is another thing."

"Ah!"

"Yes, they have been reserved here."

"Reserved? And by whom?"

"By you, apparently."

"By me?"

"Did you not engage lodgings here?"

"By no means."

Just then the landlord appeared on the threshold.

"Have you a room?" demanded Manicamp.

"Did you engage one, monsieur?"

"No."

"Then there is none."

"If that is the case I did engage one," said Manicamp.

"A room or lodgings?"

"Anything you please."

"By letter?" asked the host.

Malicorne nodded affirmatively to Manicamp.

"Certainly by letter," said Manicamp. "Did you not receive one from me?"

"Dated when?" asked the host, in whom Manicamp's hesitation had aroused suspicion.

Manicamp rubbed his ear and looked at Malicorne's window ; but Malicorne had gone and was descending the stairs to come to the aid of his friend.

Just at that moment a traveller wrapped in a long Spanish cape appeared on the porch within hearing of the conversation.

"I asked you when you wrote the letter to engage lodgings here," repeated the host, insistently.

"Last Wednesday," said the mysterious stranger in a soft, polished voice, touching the landlord on the shoulder.

Manicamp drew back, and Malicorne in turn, who had appeared on the threshold, scratched his ear. The landlord saluted the newcomer like a man who recognizes his true lodger.

"Monsieur," said he, civilly, "your apartment is waiting for you as well as your stables. Only —"

He looked around.

"Your horses?" he asked.

"My horses may or may not arrive. It makes but little difference to you, probably, provided you are paid for what you have reserved."

The landlord bowed still lower.

"You have besides," continued the unknown traveller, "kept the little room which I engaged?"

"Oh!" said Malicorne, trying to hide.

"Your friend has occupied it for the last week," said the landlord, pointing to Malicorne, who was making himself as small as possible.

The traveller drew his cloak across the lower part of his face and threw a hasty glance at Malicorne.

"Monsieur is no friend of mine," said he.

The host gave a start.

"I do not know the gentleman," continued the traveller.

"What!" cried the innkeeper, turning to Malicorne, "you are not monsieur's friend?"

"What does it matter, provided you are paid?" said Malicorne, majestically parodying the stranger.

"It matters so much," said the host, who was beginning to see that one person had been mistaken for another, "that I beg you, monsieur, to vacate the rooms engaged in advance by some one else."

"But," said Malicorne, "monsieur does not need both a room on the first floor and an apartment on the second; if monsieur

wants the room I will take the apartment ; if monsieur chooses the apartment I will keep the room."

"I am distressed, monsieur," said the traveller in his soft voice, "but I need both the room and the apartment."

"But for whom?" demanded Malicorne.

"The apartment for myself."

"Well, but the room?"

"Look!" said the traveller, pointing to a sort of procession which was approaching.

Malicorne glanced in the direction indicated and saw a litter on which lay the Franciscan, whose occupation of his room he had described to Montalais, with details added by himself, and whom he had in vain tried to convert to humbler views.

The result of the arrival of the unknown traveller and of the sick Franciscan was Malicorne's unceremonious expulsion from the inn of the Beau Paon by the host and the peasants who had carried in the monk.

The reader has been made aware of the result of this expulsion, of the conversation of Manicamp with Montalais; of the success of Manicamp, who was cleverer than Malicorne, in finding news of De Guiche, of the subsequent conversation between Montalais and Malicorne, and finally of the lodgings furnished to Manicamp and Malicorne by the Comte de Saint-Aignan.

It remains for us to inform our readers about the traveller in the cape, the chief tenant of the two apartments of which Malicorne had occupied one, and the Franciscan, quite as mysterious, whose arrival together with that of the stranger in the cloak was unfortunate enough to upset the plans of the two friends.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

A JESUIT OF THE ELEVENTH YEAR.

IN the first place, not to weary the reader, we will hasten to answer the first question. The traveller with the cloak held over his face was Aramis, who after he had left Fouquet, and taken from a portmanteau opened by his lackey a cavalier's complete costume, left the château and went to the inn of the Beau Paon, where by letter, seven days before, he had, as the

host had said, engaged a room and an apartment. On the expulsion of Malicorne and Manicamp, Aramis approached the Franciscan and asked him which he preferred, the room or the apartment. The monk asked where each was situated.

He was told that the room was on the first floor and the apartment on the second.

"The room, then," said he.

Aramis did not insist, but with perfect submission said to the landlord:

"The room."

And bowing respectfully, he withdrew to the apartment.

The monk was at once carried to the room. Now is it not remarkable, this respect of a prelate for a simple monk, and for a monk of a mendicant order, to whom was given up, without his even asking for it, a room which so many travellers had wanted?

How, too, can we explain the unexpected arrival of Aramis at the inn of the Beau Paon,—he who had entered the château with M. Fouquet, and who could have remained there with him?

The monk bore the moving up the stairs without uttering a complaint, although it was evident that his suffering was great, and that each time the litter hit the wall or the railing of the staircase his whole body felt a terrible shock. Finally, when he arrived in the room:

"Help me to place myself in that armchair," said he to the porters.

They placed the litter on the ground, and raising the sick man as gently as possible, carried him to the armchair he had indicated, and which stood at the head of the bed.

"Now," he added, with a marked gentleness of word and gesture, "send the landlord to me."

They obeyed.

Five minutes later the landlord appeared at the door.

"My friend," said the Franciscan, "dismiss these good fellows, I beg of you; they are vassals of the Vicomte de Melun. They found me on the road where I had fainted from the heat, and without thinking as to whether they would be paid for their trouble, they wanted to carry me to their own homes. But I know what the hospitality they give a sick man costs these poor fellows, and I preferred the inn, where, for that matter, I was expected."

The landlord looked at the Franciscan in surprise.

The latter with his thumb made the sign of the cross on his breast.

The host replied by making the same sign on his left shoulder.

"Yes, it is true," said he, "you were expected, my father; but we hoped you would arrive in better condition."

And while the peasants looked in surprise at the proud host who had suddenly become respectful in the presence of this poor monk, the Franciscan drew from his long pocket two or three pieces of gold, which he held up.

"There, my friends," said he, "is something with which to pay you for the care you gave me. So be easy and do not be afraid of leaving me here. The Order for which I am travelling does not wish me to beg; but as the attention you have given me deserves a reward, take these two louis and retire in peace."

The peasants dared not accept them.

The host took them from the monk's hand and put them into that of a peasant.

The four porters retired, opening their eyes wider than ever.

The door closed, and while the host stood respectfully near it the monk collected himself for a moment. Then he passed his hand, which was dried up with fever, over his sallow brow, and with his nervous, agitated fingers, rubbed his gray beard.

His large eyes, hollow from sickness and nervousness, seemed to follow a sad, far-off idea.

"What physicians have you at Fontainebleau?" he asked finally.

"We have three, my father."

"What are their names?"

"Luiniguet, first."

"Next?"

"A Carmelite brother named Hubert."

"Then?"

"Then a secular member by the name of Grisart."

"Ah! Grisart!" murmured the monk. "Send for M. Grisart at once."

The landlord promptly started to obey.

"By the way, what priests are there at hand here?"

"What priests?"

"Yes; of what orders?"

"There are Jesuits, Augustines, and Cordeliers; but, my

father, the Jesuits are the nearest at hand. I will send for a Jesuit confessor; shall I?"

"Yes."

The host departed.

From the sign exchanged between them it will be guessed that the host and the sick man had recognized each other as two affiliated members of the redoubtable Society of Jesus.

Left alone, the Franciscan drew from his pocket a bundle of papers, some of which he ran over with scrupulous attention. However, the pain from his illness overcame his strength; his eyes rolled, a cold sweat poured down his face, he almost fainted; his head fell back, while his arms hung down on both sides of his chair.

For five minutes he lay without moving, when the landlord entered, bringing in the physician, whom he scarcely had allowed time to dress.

The noise of their entrance, the current of air occasioned by the opening of the door, restored the sick man to consciousness. He hastily seized his scattered papers, and with his long, bony hand hid them under the cushions of the armchair.

The landlord withdrew, leaving the patient and the doctor together.

"Come," said the monk to the doctor, "come, M. Grisart, approach, for there is no time to be lost; touch, feel, consider, and pronounce your verdict."

"Our landlord," replied the physician, "has told me that I was to have the pleasure of giving my services to an affiliated brother."

"Yes," replied the Franciscan, "tell me the truth; I feel very ill; it seems to me as if I were going to die."

The doctor took the monk's hand and felt his pulse.

"Oh," said he, "a dangerous fever."

"Do you call a fever dangerous?" asked the patient, with an imperious look.

"To an affiliated member of the first or the second year," replied the physician, looking inquiringly at the monk, "I should say, a fever that may be cured."

"But to me?" said the monk.

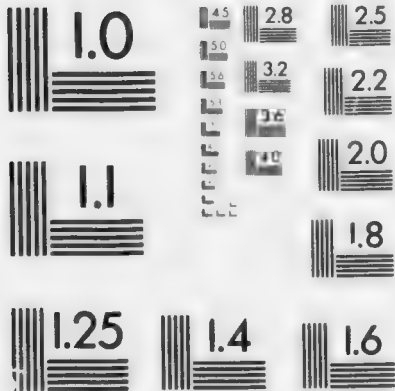
The physician hesitated.

"Look at my gray hair and my forehead lined with care," he continued; "look at the wrinkles by which I count my trials; I am a Jesuit of the eleventh year, M. Grisart."



MICROCOPY RESOLUTION TEST CHART

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The physician started.

A Jesuit of the eleventh year was one of those men initiated into all the secrets of the order; one of those men from whom science has no further secret, for whom society has no further barrier, temporal obedience has no more trammels.

"So," said Grisart, bowing with respect, "I am in the presence of a master?"

"Yes; act, therefore, accordingly."

"You wish to know?"

"My true condition."

"Well," said the physician, "you have brain fever, otherwise called acute meningitis, which has reached its highest degree of intensity."

"In that case there is no hope, is there?" asked the monk, shortly.

"I did not say that," replied the doctor; "yet considering the disordered state of the brain, the shortness of the breath, the rapidity of the pulse, the burning of the terrible fever which is devouring you —"

"And which has prostrated me three times since morning," said the brother.

"Therefore I call it terrible. But why did you not stop on the way?"

"I was expected here, and I had to come."

"Even were you to die?"

"Even were I to die."

"Well, considering all these symptoms, I will tell you that your condition is almost hopeless."

The monk smiled strangely.

"What you tell me is perhaps sufficient for an affiliated member, even of the eleventh year; but it is not enough for me, M. Grisart, it is too little, and I have a right to demand more. Come, let us be more candid still, and as frank as if we were speaking to God. Besides, I have already sent for a confessor."

"Oh, I have hopes, however," murmured the doctor.

"Answer," said the sick man, displaying with a dignified gesture a gold ring, the stone of which had until then been turned in, and which bore engraved thereon the sign representing the Society of Jesus.

Grisart uttered an exclamation:

"The general!" he cried.

"Silence!" said the monk; "you see that it is necessary to tell the truth."

"My lord, my lord, send for the confessor," murmured Grisart, "for in two hours, at the first attack, you will grow delirious and will pass away at the crisis."

"Very well," said the patient, whose brow had contracted for a moment; "I have two hours, then?"

"Yes, without doubt, if you take the potion I am going to send you."

"And that will give me two hours?"

"Yes."

"I will take it, were it poison, for these two hours are necessary, not only for me, but for the glory of the order."

"Oh, what a loss!" murmured the physician, "what a catastrophe for us!"

"It is the death of a man, that is all," replied the monk, "and God will see that the poor monk who is about to leave you will find a worthy successor. Farewell, M. Grisart, it is already a favor of the Lord that I have met you. A doctor who had not been affiliated to our holy order would have left me ignorant of my condition, and counting on living several days. I should not have taken the necessary precautions. You are a scholar, M. Grisart; that does honor to us all. It would have been repugnant to me to have seen one of us mediocre in his profession. Farewell, M. Grisart, farewell; and send me your cordial at once!"

"At least give me your blessing, monseigneur!"

"In my mind, yes, — go — in my mind, I tell you — *Animo*, M. Grisart, — *viribus impossibile!*"

And he again fell back in his armchair, unconscious.

M. Grisart hesitated as to whether he should give him immediate assistance or hasten to prepare the promised cordial. He evidently decided in favor of the latter, for he hurried from the room and disappeared down the stairs.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE STATE SECRET.

A FEW moments after Dr. Grisart left, the confessor arrived. Scarcely had he crossed the threshold when the Franciscan fixed on him his penetrating glance. Then shaking his gray head he murmured :

"A poor mind ; I hope God will forgive me for dying without the help of this human infirmity."

The confessor, on his side, looked with astonishment, almost with terror, at the dying man. Never had he seen eyes so bright just as they were about to close, looks so terrible as they were about to be quenched in death.

The Franciscan made a rapid and imperious movement of his hand.

"Be seated, father," said he, "and listen to me."

The Jesuit confessor, a good priest, simple and innocent, and but lately initiated into the mysteries of the order, yielded to the superiority of the penitent.

"There are several persons in this inn," continued the Franciscan.

"But," said the Jesuit, "I thought I had come to hear a confession. Is what you are saying a confession ?"

"Why this question ?"

"In order to know if I am to keep your words secret"

"My words are part of my confession ; I entrust them to you in your character of confessor."

"Very well !" said the priest, seating himself in the arm-chair which the Franciscan had just left with great difficulty to lie down on the bed.

The Franciscan continued :

"There are, I repeat, several persons in this hotel."

"So I have heard."

"They ought to be eight in number."

The Jesuit made a sign that he understood.

"The first to whom I wish to speak," said the dying man, "is a German from Vienna, whose name is the Baron von Westpur. Be good enough to send for him, and to say to him that the one he expected has arrived."

The confessor, astonished, looked at his penitent; the confession seemed strange to him.

"Obey," said the Franciscan, in an irresistible tone of command.

The good Jesuit, wholly submissive, rose and left the room.

When he had gone the Franciscan gathered up the papers which an attack of fever had already forced him once to set aside.

"The Baron von Wostpur? Good!" said he; "ambitious, a fool, and of limited means."

He folded the papers, which he thrust under his pillow.

Rapid steps were heard at the end of the corridor.

The confessor entered, followed by the Baron von Wostpur, who walked with head raised as if he were discussing with himself the question of touching the ceiling with his plume.

Therefore at sight of the sombre-looking Franciscan, and of the plain-looking room, he said:

"Who sent for me?"

"I," said the Franciscan.

Then turning to the confessor:

"Good father," said he, "leave us alone one moment; when monsieur goes out, come back."

The Jesuit left and no doubt took advantage of his temporary exile from the dying man's room to ask the landlord something about the strange penitent, who treated his confessor as if he were a valet.

The baron approached the bed and was about to speak, but the hand of the Franciscan imposed silence on him.

"The moments are precious," said the latter, hastily. "You came here for the competition, did you not?"

"Yes, father."

"You hope to be elected general?"

"Yes."

"You know on what conditions only one can attain this high position, which makes a man the master of kings, the equal of popes?"

"Who are you," demanded the baron, "to subject me to these interrogatories?"

"I am he whom you expected."

"The elector-general?"

"I am the elected."

"You are —"

The Franciscan did not give him time to finish ; he stretched out his shrunken hand on which shone the ring of the generalship.

The baron sprang back in surprise ; then at once bowing in profound respect, cried :

"What, you here, monseigneur ? You, in this poor room, on this wretched bed, seeking and choosing the future general, your successor ?"

"Do not trouble yourself about that, monsieur ; fulfil quickly the principal condition of furnishing to the Order a secret of such importance that by your instrumentality one of the greatest courts of Europe will be forever subjected to the Order. Well, have you this secret, as you promised to have in your request addressed to the Grand Council ?"

"Monseigneur —"

"But let us proceed in due order. You are the Baron von Wostpur ?"

"Yes, monseigneur."

"This letter is from you ?"

The general of the Jesuits drew a paper from his bundle and handed it to the baron. The latter glanced at it, and made a sign in the affirmative.

"Yes, monseigneur," said he, "this letter is from me."

"And you can show me the reply sent by the secretary of the Grand Council ?"

"Here it is, monseigneur."

The baron held towards the monk a letter bearing the simple address :

"To his Excellency the Baron von Wostpur," and containing the single phrase :

*"From the 15th to the 22d May, Fontainebleau, Hotel of the Beau Paon. A.M.D.G."*¹

"Very good !" said the Franciscan ; "now speak."

"I have a body of troops, composed of fifty thousand men ; all the officers are won over. I am encamped on the Danube. In four days I can overthrow the emperor, who, as you know, is opposed to the progress of our Order, and replace him by the prince of his family on which the Order may determine."

The Franciscan listened without giving a sign of life.

"Is that all ?" said he.

¹ Ad majorem Dei gloriam.

"There is a European revolution in my plan," said the baron.

"That is well, M. de Wostpur, you will receive the reply; return to your room, and leave Fontainebleau in a quarter of an hour."

The baron withdrew backwards, as obsequiously as if he were taking leave of the emperor he was ready to betray.

"There is no secret there," murmured the Franciscan; "it is a plot. Besides," he added, after a moment's reflection, "the future of Europe is no longer in the House of Austria."

And with a red pencil he held in his hand he struck the name of the Baron von Wostpur from the list.

"Now for the cardinal," said he; "from Spain we ought to have something more serious."

Raising his eyes, he saw the confessor, who was awaiting his orders, as submissive as a school-boy.

"Ah!" said he, noticing his submission, "you have spoken to the landlord?"

"Yes, monseigneur, and to the physician."

"To Grisart?"

"Yes."

"Is he here, then?"

"He is waiting with the promised potion."

"That is well. If necessary I will call him. Now you understand the full importance of my confession, do you not?"

"Yes, monseigneur."

"Then go and send me the Spanish cardinal, Herrebia. Make haste. Only this time, as you understand the matter in hand, you will remain near me, for I feel faint."

"Shall I summon the doctor?"

"Not yet. The Spanish cardinal — that is all — go."

Five minutes later the cardinal entered the little room, pale and nervous.

"I learn, monseigneur —" he stammered.

"To the point," said the Franciscan, in a faint voice.

And he showed the cardinal a letter which the latter had written to the Grand Council.

"Is that your handwriting?" he asked.

"Yes, but —"

"And your summons?"

The cardinal hesitated to answer. His purple revolted against the garb of the poor Franciscan.

The dying man extended his hand and showed the ring, which produced its effect, greater in proportion to the greatness of the one over whom the Franciscan exercised his influence.

"The secret, the secret, quick!" said the dying man, leaning on his confessor.

"*Coram isti?*" asked the nervous cardinal.

"Speak Spanish," said the Franciscan, showing the liveliest attention.

"You know, monseigneur," said the cardinal, continuing the conversation in Castilian, "that the condition of the marriage of the Infanta with the King of France is an absolute renunciation of the rights of the aforesaid Infanta, as well as that of Louis XIV., to all claim to the crown of Spain?"

The Franciscan made a sign in the affirmative.

"The result is," continued the cardinal, "that the peace and alliance between the two kingdoms depend on the observance of that clause of the contract."

The same sign from the Franciscan.

"Not only France and Spain," said the cardinal, "but the whole of Europe would be shaken by the faithlessness of one of these parties."

Another movement of the patient's head.

"It further results," continued the orator, "that the one who might foresee events and give as certain that which is nothing more than a cloud in the mind of man — that is the idea of the good or the evil to come — would preserve the world from a great catastrophe. And the event, imagined in the brain of him who originated it, could be turned to the advantage of our order."

"*Pronto! pronto!*"¹ murmured the Franciscan, who grew pale and leaned upon the priest.

The cardinal approached the ear of the dying man.

"Well, monseigneur," said he, "I know that the King of France has decided that at the first pretext, a death, for instance, either that of the King of Spain or that of a brother of the Infanta, France will, arms in hand, claim the inheritance; and I have in readiness the plan of policy agreed on by Louis XIV. for this occasion."

"This plan?" asked the Franciscan.

"Is here," said the cardinal.

¹ Closer! Closer!

"In whose handwriting is it?"

"In mine."

"Have you anything further to say?"

"I think I have said a good deal, monseigneur," replied the cardinal.

"Yes, you have rendered a great service to the Order, but how did you procure the details by the aid of which you have constructed your plan?"

"I have the under-servants of the King of France in my pay, and I get from them all the waste paper which they have saved instead of burning."

"That is clever," murmured the Franciscan, trying to smile. "M. le Cardinal, you will leave this hotel in a quarter of an hour. A reply shall be sent you. Go!"

The cardinal withdrew.

"Summon Grisart and send me the Venetian, Marini," said the patient.

While the confessor obeyed, the Franciscan, instead of striking out the cardinal's name as he had done that of the baron, placed a cross by the side of it.

Then, exhausted by the effort, he fell back on the bed murmuring the name of Dr. Grisart.

When he came to himself he had drunk half the potion, the remainder of which was in the glass, and he was supported by the doctor while the Venetian and the confessor stood near the door.

The Venetian went through the same formalities as his two predecessors, hesitated as they had done at sight of the two strangers, but, reassured by the order of the general, revealed that the Pope, frightened by the power of the Order, was weaving a plot for the general expulsion of the Jesuits and was tampering with the courts of Europe to obtain their aid. He mentioned the auxiliaries of the pontiff and his means of action, indicating the precise locality in the archipelago where suddenly two cardinals, adepts of the eleventh year and consequently high in authority, were to be transported with thirty-two of the leading affiliated members to Rome.

The Franciscan thanked Signor Marini. His denunciation of the papal plan was of no small service to the society.

After this the Venetian was ordered to leave in a quarter of an hour, and departed as radiant as if he already held the ring, the sign of the generalship of the society.

But while he was leaving the Franciscan murmured from his bed :

"All these men are spies or detectives ; not one of them is a general. All have discovered a plot, not one a secret. It is not by ruin or war or force that the Society of Jesus must be governed ; it is by the mysterious influence of moral superiority. No, the man is not yet found, and to complete the misfortune God strikes me down and I die. Oh, must the society fall with me for want of a column to support it ? Must death, waiting for me, swallow with me the future of the Order ? — this future which ten years more of my life would have made eternal ! For it is opening radiant and splendid with the reign of the new King."

These words, half thought, half uttered, the good Jesuit heard with terror as we hear the delirium of one in a fever ; while Grisart, of a more cultivated intellect, was devouring them as if they were revelations from an unknown world into which he could see, but to which he could not attain.

Suddenly the Franciscan rose.

"Let us finish," said he, "death is approaching. Oh, just now I was dying calmly. I was hoping. Now I fall back in despair unless among those who are left — Grisart, Grisart, save me for another hour !"

Grisart drew near the dying man and made him swallow some drops, not of the potion which was in the glass, but of the contents of a flask which he carried.

"Call the Scotchman," cried the Franciscan. "Call the merchant from Bremen ! Call ! Call ! Jesus, I die, I suffocate !"

The confessor rushed out to seek assistance, as if there were any human force which could stay the finger of death hovering over the sick man. On the threshold of the door he found Aramis, who, his finger on his lips like the statue of Harpocrates, the god of silence, sent him by a look to the end of the room.

The physician and the confessor, however, after consulting each other with their eyes, made a movement as if to push Aramis aside, but the latter, with two signs of the cross differently made, fixed them in their places.

"A leader !" murmured both.

Aramis advanced slowly into the room in which the dying man lay struggling in the death agony.

The Franciscan, whether from the effect of the elixir or because the sight of Aramis had restored his strength, made a movement, and with shining eyes, half-open mouth, hair dripping with perspiration, rose in his bed.

Aramis felt that the air of the room was suffocating. Every window was closed. A fire was burning on the hearth. Two yellow wax candles were dripping over the copper candlesticks and rendered still more dense the stifling atmosphere.

Aramis opened a window, and fixing upon the dying man a look full of understanding and respect, said to him:

"Monseigneur, I beg your pardon for coming to you without a summons, but your condition frightened me, and I feared you might die without seeing me, for I am the sixth on your list."

The dying man started and glanced at his list.

"You are he formerly called Aramis, later the Chevalier d'Herblay? You are now the Bishop of Vannes?"

"Yes, my lord."

"I know you, I have seen you."

"At the last jubilee we were together with the Holy Father."

"Yes, yes, I remember you. And you place yourself among the candidates?"

"My lord, I have heard it said that the Order needed to possess a great state secret, and knowing that you had, through modesty, resigned in advance your position to him who should learn this secret, I wrote that I was prepared to compete, as I alone was in possession of a secret which to me seemed important."

"Speak," said the Franciscan. "I am ready to hear you and to judge of the importance of your information."

"My lord, a secret as valuable as the one which I shall confide to you is not given by word of mouth. Every idea which has once left one's mind to be revealed in any way whatsoever no longer is the property even of him who gave it birth. Spoken words may be overheard by ears attentive and inimical; it must not then be revealed at random, for in such a case the secret ceases to be a secret."

"How, then, do you intend to give your information?" asked the dying man.

With one hand Aramis signed to the doctor and the confessor to move away, and with the other he held out to the Franciscan a paper enclosed in a double envelope.

"But the writing?" asked the Franciscan. "Is not that more dangerous than speaking?"

"No, my lord," said Aramis, "for in the envelope you will find characters which only you and I can understand."

The Franciscan looked at Aramis in ever-increasing surprise.

"It is," continued the latter, "the cipher which you used in 1655, and which your secretary Juan Jujan, who is dead, could decipher were he alive."

"Do you understand the cipher?"

"I was the one who gave it to him."

And Aramis, bowing with respectful grace, started to the door as if to leave.

But a gesture from the Franciscan, accompanied by a cry calling him back, arrested him.

"Jesus!" said he. "*Ecce homo!*"

Then reading the paper a second time he said, "Come here quickly."

Aramis approached the Franciscan with the same calm face, the same respectful manner.

Extending his arm, the Franciscan burned in the candle the paper which Aramis had given him, then, taking the hand of Aramis and drawing him nearer he asked:

"How and through whom could you possibly have discovered such a secret?"

"Through Madame de Chevreuse, the intimate friend and confidant of the queen."

"And Madame de Chevreuse?"

"Is dead."

"And others? Did others know it?"

"Only a man and a woman of the people."

"Who were they?"

"Those who had raised him."

"What has become of them?"

"Dead too. The secret destroys like fire."

"Yet you have survived."

"No one is aware that I know it."

"How long have you known it?"

"For fifteen years."

"And you have kept it?"

"I wished to live."

"And you give it to the Order without hope of promotion, without reward?"

"I give it to the Order with the hope of promotion and reward," said Aramis; "for if you live, my lord, you will make of me, now that you know me, what I can and ought to be."

"And since I am dying," cried the Franciscan, "I make you my successor. Here!"

And drawing off his ring he placed it on the finger of Aramis.

Then, turning to the two spectators of this scene, he said:

"Be witnesses, and testify, if need be, that sick in body, but sound in mind, I have freely and voluntarily given this ring, the token of supreme power, to Monseigneur d'Herblay, Bishop of Vannes, whom I name my successor, and before whom I, a humble sinner about to appear at God's throne, am the first to prostrate myself as an example to all."

The Franciscan bent low while the physician and the Jesuit fell on their knees.

Even while he became paler than the dying man himself, Aramis turned his eye upon every actor in the scene; satisfied ambition flowed with the blood to his heart.

"Let us hasten," said the Franciscan; "what I had to do here was urgent. It devoured me. I shall never accomplish it."

"But I shall," said Aramis.

"That is well," said the Franciscan.

Then turning to the Jesuit and the physician:

"Leave us alone," said he.

Both obeyed.

"With this token," said he, "you are the man to move the earth; with this token you will overthrow; with this token you will edify; *in hoc signo vinces*. Close the door," said the Franciscan to Aramis.

Aramis drew the bolt and returned to the monk.

"The Pope has conspired against the Order," said the Franciscan, "and must die."

"He shall die," replied Aramis, calmly.

"There are seven hundred thousand livres due to a merchant of Bremen named Bonstett, who came here to obtain the guarantee of my signature."

"He shall be paid," said Aramis.

"Six knights of Malta — their names are here — have discovered through the indiscretion of an affiliated member of the eleventh year the three mysteries; it must be ascertained

what these men have done with the secret, which must be again secured and buried."

"This shall be done."

"Three dangerous affiliated members must be sent away to Thibet, there to perish. They are condemned. Here are their names."

"I will have the sentence executed."

"Finally there is a lady at Antwerp, a grand-niece of Ravallac, who has in her possession certain papers which are compromising to the Order. For fifty-one years the family has had a pension of fifty thousand livres. The pension is heavy, the Order is not rich. Buy the papers for a sum of money paid down, or in case of refusal stop the pension — but risk nothing."

"I will think about it," said Aramis.

"A vessel coming from Lima must have entered the port of Lisbon last week; ostensibly it is laden with chocolate, in reality with gold. Each nugget is hidden under a coating of chocolate. This vessel belongs to the Order. It is worth seventeen million livres. You will see that it is claimed. Here are the bills of lading."

"To what port shall I have it brought?"

"To Bayonne."

"Unless there are head winds it will be here in three weeks. Is that all?"

The Franciscan gave an affirmative sign with his head, for he could speak no more. The blood rushed to his throat and head and spurted from his mouth, nose, and eyes. The wretched man had only time to press the hand of Aramis when he fell in convulsions from his bed upon the floor.

Aramis placed his hand over his heart, but it had ceased to beat.

As he bent over, Aramis noted that a bit of the paper he had given the Franciscan had escaped burning.

He picked it up and burned it to the last atom.

Then calling back the confessor and the doctor:

"Your penitent is with God," said he to the confessor; "he needs nothing further except prayers and the burial for the dead. Go and prepare everything for a simple funeral such as is suitable for a poor monk. Go."

The Jesuit left.

Then turning to the doctor and seeing his pale, anxious face:

"M. Grisart," said he in a low tone, "empty that glass and destroy it; there remains too much of what the Grand Council commanded you to put in it."

Grisart, overcome, amazed, overwhelmed, almost fell backwards.

Aramis shrugged his shoulders in pity, took the glass, and emptied its contents into the ashes of the hearth.

Then he went out, carrying with him the papers of the dead.

CHAPTER XXXV.

A MISSION.

THE following day, or rather the same day, — for the events we have just described did not end until three o'clock in the morning, — before breakfast, and as the King was starting to mass with the two queens; as Monsieur with the Chevalier de Lorraine and some other intimate friends had mounted their horses to go to the river, in order to take one of the much-talked of baths of which the ladies were so fond; as there was left in the château no one but Madame, who under the pretext of indisposition did not wish to go out, — Montalais was seen, or rather was not seen, to glide out of the room of the maids of honor, drawing after her La Vallière, who tried to hide as much as possible, and both, hurrying through the gardens, looking back at every step, succeeded in reaching the grove.

The weather was cloudy; a hot breeze bent the flowers and the shrubs, the burning dust swept along the roads and rose in whirlwinds to the trees.

Montalais, who during the whole of the walk had fulfilled the duties of a clever scout, advanced a few steps farther, and looking back to make sure that no one was listening or coming, said:

"Thank God we are alone. Since yesterday every one has been spying, and a circle has been formed around us as if we really had the plague."

La Vallière bent her head and heaved a sigh.

"It is positively unheard of," continued Montalais; "from M. Malicorne to M. de Saint-Aignan, every one wants to know

our secret. Come, Louise, let us rehearse a little in order that I may know how to act."

La Vallière raised to her companion her beautiful eyes, as clear and deep as the blue of a spring sky.

"And I," said she, "will ask you why we have been summoned to Madame's room? Why did we sleep with her instead of in our own rooms as usual? Why did you return so late, and why this surveillance this morning over us?"

"My dear Louise, you answer my question by a question, or rather by ten questions, which is not answering at all. I will tell you that later, and as it is of secondary importance, you can wait. What I ask you — for everything depends on that — is whether there is or is not a secret?"

"I do not know if there is a secret," said La Vallière, "but what I do know, at least, is that there has been much imprudence since my silly speech and my sillier fainting of yesterday. Every one here is making comments on us."

"Speak for yourself, my dear," said Montalais, laughing, "for yourself and for Tonnay-Charente, for both of you made your declarations to the skies, and, unfortunately, they were intercepted."

La Vallière bent her head.

"Really," said she, "you overwhelm me."

"I?"

"Yes, these jokes will kill me."

"Listen, Louise, these are not jokes; on the contrary, nothing is more serious. I did not drag you out of the château, I did not miss mass, I did not pretend to have a cold like Madame, which she has no more than I have; lastly, I did not display ten times more diplomacy than M. Colbert inherited from M. de Mazarin, and makes use of with M. Fouquet, in order to succeed in confiding to you my several troubles, for the sole end that when we are alone, with no one to listen to us, you should deceive me. No, believe me, when I question you it is not merely out of curiosity, but because the situation is really serious. What you said yesterday is known; on this text every one is preaching. Each one embellishes it to his utmost with the flowers of his imagination; you had the honor last night and again this morning of being the subject of the whole court, my dear, and the number of tender and witty remarks ascribed to you, were they favorably reported, would make Mademoiselle de Scudéry and her brother burst with spite."

"But, my good Montalais," said the poor girl, "you know better than any one what I said, since it was in your presence that I said it."

"Yes, I know it, of course! But that is not the question. I have not forgotten a single word you uttered, but did you think what you were saying?"

Louise was troubled.

"Questions still!" she cried. "Alas! when I would give the whole world to forget what I said, how is it that every one tries to make me remember? Oh, it is terrible!"

"What is? Let us hear."

"To have a friend who ought to spare me, who could advise me and help me save myself, but who kills me, murders me!"

"There! there!" said Montalais, "after having said too little, now you are saying too much. No one is thinking of killing you, nor of robbing you, even of your secret; we want it voluntarily or not at all; for it is not only a question of your affairs, but of ours too; and Tonnay-Charente would say just as I do, were she here. Last night she asked to talk with me in our room, and I was going there after the Manicamp and Malicorne conversations, when on my return, which was somewhat late, I learned that Madame had sequestered her maids of honor, and that we were to sleep in her rooms instead of in our own. Now Madame has shut up her maids of honor in order that they may not have the time to consult together, and this morning she was closeted with Tonnay-Charente for the same purpose. Tell me, then, to what extent Athenais and I may rely on you, so that we can tell you how much you may rely on us."

"I do not understand your question," said Louise, greatly agitated.

"Hum! you seem to understand very well. But I will put my questions in a more precise manner, in order that you may not have the least chance to evade them, so listen: *Do you love M. de Bragelonne?* That is clear, is it not?"

At this question, which fell as the first projectile of a besieging army into a besieged town, Louise gave a start.

"Do I love Raoul!" she exclaimed, "the friend of my childhood, my brother!"

"No, no, no! Again you evade me, or rather you wish to escape me. I do not ask if you love Raoul, the friend of your

childhood and your brother; I ask you if you love the Vicomte de Bragelonne, your affianced husband."

"Oh, mercy! my dear, what severity there is in your words!" said Louise.

"You get no quarter from me. I am neither more nor less severe than usual; I ask you a question; answer it."

"Surely," said Louise, in a choking voice, "you are not speaking to me as a friend; but I will answer you, so far as I am concerned, like a true friend."

"Answer."

"Well, my heart is full of scruples and ridiculous pride about everything which a woman ought to keep secret, and no one has ever read into the depths of my soul in regard to this."

"I know that perfectly. Had I read it, I should not question you; I should simply say: 'My good Louise, you have the happiness to know M. de Bragelonne, who is a fine fellow and an advantageous match for a girl without fortune. M. de la Fère will leave something like fifteen thousand livres a year to his son. So some day you as the wife of this son will have fifteen thousand livres a year. That is fine. Go, therefore, neither to the right nor to the left; go frankly to M. de Bragelonne, that is, to the altar whither he will lead you. Afterwards? Well, afterwards, according to his disposition, you will be either emancipated or enslaved; that is, you will have the right to commit all sorts of follies which people commit who have either too much liberty or too little!' That, my dear Louise, is what I should have told you at first, had I read the depths of your heart."

"And I should have thanked you," murmured Louise, "although the advice does not seem to me wholly good."

"Wait, wait. But immediately after I had given you that, I should have added: 'Louise, it is dangerous to spend whole days with your head on your breast, your hands idle, your eyes vague; it is dangerous to seek dark paths and no longer to smile at the amusements which delight the heart of every young girl; it is dangerous, Louise, to write with the tip of your shoe on the sand, as you do, letters which you erase in vain, but which still show under the heel, especially when these letters resemble L's and B's; it is dangerous, finally, to imagine a thousand strange fancies, the fruit of solitude and heartache. Such an imagination makes hollows in the cheeks

of a poor girl, as well as in her brain ; so that it is not unusual, under such circumstances, to see the most agreeable person in the world become the most disagreeable, and the wittiest become the most stupid.”

“Thanks, my dear Aure,” replied La Vallière, gently ; “it is like you to speak to me this way, and I thank you for it.”

“It is for dreamers that I speak ; so do not take any of my words to yourself, except those you think you ought to take. I do not know what story comes to my mind about some silly or melancholy girl, for M. Dangeau explained to me the other day that grammatically *mélancolie* should be written *mélancholie* with an *h*, because the French word is formed from two Greek words, one meaning *noir* [black] and the other *bile* [bile]. I was thinking, then, of this young girl who died of *black bile*, from having imagined that the prince, the king, or the emperor — no matter which — had fallen in love with her ; whereas the prince, the king, or the emperor, whichever you please, was plainly in love with another, and — strange fact, which she did not perceive, although every one around her perceived it — chose her as a screen for his own love affair. You laugh as I do at this poor silly girl, do you not, La Vallière ?”

“I laugh ?” stammered Louise, as pale as death ; “yes, of course I laugh.”

“And you are right, for it is amusing. The story or the history, as you will, pleased me ; that is why I remembered it and told it to you. Just imagine, my good Louise, the ravage which that kind of melancholy with an *h* would make in your brain, for instance. As to me, I resolved to tell you the story, for if such a thing happened to one of us, it would be necessary to be convinced of its truth ; to-day it is a snare, to-morrow it would be a joke, day after to-morrow it would be death.”

La Vallière started and grew still paler, if that were possible.

“When a king takes an interest in us,” continued Montalais, “he lets it be clearly seen, and if we are what he wants he knows how to gain us. You see, then, Louise, that in such circumstances, between young girls exposed to such a danger, there should be perfect confidence in order that the hearts which are not morbid may watch over those that may become so.”

“Silence !” cried La Vallière. “Some one is coming.”

"That is true," said Montalais; "but who can it be? Every one is either at mass with the King or bathing with Monsieur."

At the end of the path the young girls saw almost immediately, beneath the arching trees, the graceful bearing and noble form of a young man who, with his sword under his arm and a cloak over it, booted and spurred, saluted them from afar with a gentle smile.

"Raoul!" cried Montalais.

"M. de Bragelonne!" murmured Louise.

"A very natural judge to decide between our opinions," said Montalais.

"Oh, Montalais! Montalais! For pity's sake," cried La Vallière, "after having been cruel do not be inexorable!"

These words, uttered with all the fervor of a prayer, effaced from the features if not from the heart of Montalais every trace of irony.

"Oh, you are as handsome as Amadis, M. de Bragelonne!" cried she to Raoul; "and armed and booted like him!"

"A thousand compliments, young ladies," replied Bragelonne, bowing.

"But why these boots?" repeated Montalais, while La Vallière, although she looked at Raoul with a surprise equal to that of her companion, nevertheless kept silent.

"Why?" said Raoul.

"Yes," ventured La Vallière.

"Because I am going away," said Bragelonne, looking at Louise.

The young girl felt herself seized by a superstitious terror and swayed.

"You are going away, Raoul?" cried she. "Where are you going?"

"My dear Louise," said the young man, with the calmness that was natural to him, "I am going to England."

"What are you going to do in England?"

"The King is sending me there."

"The King!" exclaimed Louise and Aure together, involuntarily exchanging glances. Both recalled the conversation which had just been interrupted.

Raoul intercepted the glance, but could not understand it.

He naturally attributed it to the interest which the young girls took in him.

"His Majesty," said he, "has been good enough to remember that M. de la Fère is in favor with Charles II. This morning, therefore, on setting out to mass, the King, seeing me on the way, nodded to me, so I approached him. 'M. de Bragelonne,' said he, 'you will go to M. Fouquet, who has received from me letters for the King of Great Britain. You will carry them.' I bowed. 'Ah,' his Majesty added, 'before leaving you will be good enough to undertake any commissions of Madame for the King, her brother.'"

"Good heavens!" murmured Louise, greatly agitated, yet thoughtful.

"So soon! you are ordered to leave so soon?" said Montalais, paralyzed by this strange news.

"In order properly to obey those whom we respect," said Raoul, "we must obey quickly. Ten minutes after I had received the order I was ready. Madame, already informed, is writing the letter which she is good enough to entrust to me. In the meantime, hearing from Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente that you would probably be near the grove I came here and have found you both."

"And both of us in trouble, as you see," said Montalais, going to the assistance of Louise, whose face had visibly changed.

"In trouble," said Raoul, pressing with tender interest Louise de la Vallière's hand. "Why, yes, your hand is icy."

"It is nothing."

"This coldness does not reach your heart, does it, Louise?" asked the young man, with a sweet smile.

Louise raised her head quickly as if the question had been inspired by some suspicion and had aroused remorse.

"Oh, you know," said she, with an effort, "that my heart will never be cold towards such a friend as you, M. de Bragelonne."

"Thank you, Louise. I know both your heart and your soul, and it is not from the touch of your hand, I know, that one should judge of a love like yours. Louise, you know how I love you, with what confidence and what frankness I have given you my life. You will forgive me, then, will you not, for speaking to you somewhat like a child?"

"Speak, M. Raoul," said Louise, trembling from head to foot, "I am listening."

"I cannot go away from you without taking with me a pain-

ful thought; it is absurd, I know, but it is breaking my heart."

"Are you going away, then, for long?" asked La Vallière in a choking voice, while Montalais turned away her head.

"No, probably I shall not be gone longer than a fortnight."

La Vallière pressed her hand to her heart, which seemed bursting.

"It is strange," went on Raoul, looking sadly at the young girl, "I have often left you to go on perilous enterprises; I have set out happy with a free heart, my mind intoxicated with joys to come, with hopes for the future; and yet it was a question of my facing Spanish bullets or the fierce halberds of the Walloons. To-day, without danger, without anxiety, I am going by the easiest road in the world in search of a glorious reward which the favor of the King assures me; I am going to win you, perhaps; for what reward more precious than yourself could the King bestow on me? Well, Louise, I really do not know how it is, but all this happiness, all this future flees before my eyes like smoke, like an idle dream, and I have deep down in my heart a great grief, an inexpressible dejection, something lifeless like a corpse. Oh, I know why, Louise. It is because I have never loved you so well as I do now. Oh, my God! My God!"

At this exclamation, which came from a broken heart, Louise burst into tears and threw herself into the arms of Montalais.

The latter, although far from tender, felt her eyes grow moist and her heart contract as if within a band of iron.

Raoul saw the tears of his betrothed. His glance did not even seek to penetrate beneath them. He bent his knee before her and tenderly kissed her hand.

In that kiss he put all the love of his heart.

"Rise, rise!" said Montalais to him, herself on the verge of tears. "Here comes Athenais."

Raoul brushed his knee with the back of his sleeve, smiled again at Louise, who was no longer looking at him, and having warmly pressed the hand of Montalais he turned to salute Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente, whose silken dress was beginning to be heard rustling over the gravel of the path.

"Has Madame finished her letter?" he asked her when the young girl had come within range of his voice.

"Yes, monsieur, the letter is finished and sealed, and her royal Highness is waiting for you."



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At this Raoul paused just long enough to salute Athenais, cast a last look at Louise, gave a parting bow to Montalais, and set off in the direction of the château.

But as he went away he turned back again, and at the end of the long walk he turned once more. In vain, he could see nothing.

The three young girls on their side had watched him disappear with very different feelings.

"At last," said Athenais, the first to break the silence, "at last we are alone, free to discuss the great affair of yesterday, and to decide as to how we are to act in future. Now if you will give me your attention," continued she, looking around on all sides, "I will explain to you as briefly as possible our duty as I understand it; and, if you cannot take a hint, the wish of Madame."

And Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente lingered over these last words in such a manner as to leave no doubt in the minds of her companions as to the official character with which she was invested.

"Madame's wish!" cried Montalais and Louise together.

"Her *ultimatum*," replied Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente, diplomatically.

"But, for goodness sake!" murmured La Vallière, "does Madame know?"

"Madame knows more than we have said," replied Athenais, shortly. "So let us understand one another."

"Oh, yes," said Montalais, "I will listen with all my ears. Speak, Athenais, I am listening."

"Good heavens!" murmured Louise, trembling from head to foot, "shall I survive that cruel evening?"

"Oh, you need not be afraid," said Athenais, "we have a remedy."

Seating herself between her two companions, and taking a hand of each in her own, she began.

As she uttered the first words there was heard the noise of a horse galloping over the highway beyond the gates of the château.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

AS HAPPY AS A PRINCE.

JUST as he was about to enter the château, Bragelonne met De Guiche. But before having been met by Raoul, De Guiche had encountered Manicamp, who had come across Malicorne. How had Malicorne met Manicamp? Nothing simpler; he had awaited his return from mass, which he had attended with M. de Saint-Aignan.

When they met they congratulated each other on their good fortune, and Manicamp took advantage of the circumstance to ask his friend if he had not a few crowns still remaining at the bottom of his pocket.

The latter, without showing surprise at the question, which he had been expecting, replied that every pocket which one empties without refilling resembles those wells which supply water during the winter, but which gardeners ruin by exhausting during the summer; that his, Malicorne's, pocket certainly was deep, and that there was a pleasure in drawing on it in times of plenty, but that, unfortunately, abuse had brought about barrenness.

To which Manicamp dreamily had replied:

"That is true!"

"The question, then, is how to fill it," Malicorne added.

"No doubt; but how?"

"Nothing easier, my dear M. Manicamp."

"Good! Let us hear."

"A post at Monsieur's, and the pocket is full."

"Have you the post?"

"I have the promise of it."

"Well?"

"Yes; only the promise without the post is the purse without money."

"That is true," replied Manicamp a second time.

"Let us follow up the post, then," the candidate persisted.

"My dear fellow," sighed Manicamp, "a post at Monsieur's is one of the gravest difficulties of our position."

"Oh! Oh!"

"Certainly; at present we cannot ask Monsieur for anything."

"Why not?"

"Because we are not on good terms with him."

"Absurd!" said Malicorne, shortly.

"Bah! And if we show Madame any attention," said Manicamp, "could we, frankly speaking, please Monsieur?"

"Exactly; if we pay court to Madame, and are clever, we ought to be adored by Monsieur."

"Hum!"

"Or we are fools! Make haste, therefore, M. Manicamp, you who are a great politician, to reconcile M. de Guiche with his royal Highness."

"Come, what did M. de Saint-Aignan tell you, Malicorne?"

"Me? Nothing. He questioned me, that was all."

"Well, he was less discreet with me."

"He told you what?"

"That the King is madly in love with Mademoiselle de la Vallière."

"We know that, forsooth!" replied Malicorne, ironically, "and every one is talking loud enough about it for all to know; but in the meantime, do as I advise you, I beg; speak to M. de Guiche, and try to get him to make advances to Monsieur. The deuce! He certainly owes that to his royal Highness."

"But De Guiche must be seen."

"It seems to me there will be no great difficulty in that; in order to see him, do what I did to see you: wait for him; you know that naturally he is a great walker."

"Yes, but where does he walk?"

"What a question! He is in love with Madame, is he not?"

"So it is said."

"Well, he walks under the windows of Madame's apartments."

"Well, my dear Malicorne, you were not mistaken, for here he comes."

"Why, do you suppose I could be mistaken? Have you noticed that such is my habit? Tell me. Come, there is nothing like understanding each other. Are you in need of money?"

"Ah!" exclaimed Manicamp, mournfully.

"I have need of my post. Let Malicorne have the office and Malicorne will have the money. It is no more difficult than that."

"Well, in that case, make yourself easy. I will do my best."

"Do."

De Guiche advanced; Malicorne stepped aside; Manicamp stopped De Guiche.

The count was thoughtful and melancholy.

"Tell me what rhyme you are trying to find, my dear count," said Manicamp. "I have an excellent one to match yours, especially if your ends in *âme*."

De Guiche shook his head, and recognizing a friend took him by the arm.

"My dear Manicamp," said he, "I am looking for something else besides a rhyme."

"What?"

"And you will help me to find what I am looking for," continued the count, "you who are such an idle fellow, — that is, a man with a mind full of schemes."

"I am getting my schemes ready, my dear count."

"Here are the facts, then: I wish to approach a house in which I have some business."

"You must go in the direction of the house, then," said Manicamp.

"Very good; but this house is inhabited by a jealous husband."

"Is he more jealous than the dog Cerberus?"

"No; not more, but quite as much."

"Has he three mouths, like that inexorable guardian of the infernal regions? Oh, do not shrug your shoulders, my dear count. I ask this question in all good faith, since poets claim that in order to weaken Cerberus the traveller must take a cake. Now I who look at things from a prosaic side, that is, from the side of reality, I say, one cake is very little for three mouths. If your jealous husband has three mouths, count, ask for three cakes."

"Manicamp, such advice as this can be got from M. Beautru."

"In order to get better advice," said Manicamp, in a serio-comical tone, "you will have to adopt a more precise formula than the one you have used to me."

"Ah! if Raoul were here," said De Guiche, "he would understand me."

"I think so, especially if you said to him: 'I should greatly like to see Madame a little nearer, but I am afraid of Monsieur, because he is jealous.'"

"Manicamp!" exclaimed the count angrily, endeavoring to crush the jester by a look.

But the jester did not seem to feel the slightest emotion.

"What is it now, my dear count?" asked Manicamp.

"What! it is thus you blaspheme the most sacred of names!" cried De Guiche.

"What names?"

"Monsieur, Madame! the first names in the kingdom!"

"My dear count, you are strangely mistaken, I never mentioned the first names in the kingdom. I answered you in regard to a jealous husband whose name you did not tell me, but who naturally has a wife. I replied to you: 'In order to see *Madame* get a little nearer to *Monsieur*.'"

"Is that what you said?" asked the count, smiling.

"Nothing else."

"Very good; what then?"

"Now," added Manicamp, "suppose that it be the duchess — and the duke; very well, I shall say to you, let us get into that house, whose ever it is; for that is a manœuvre which in any case cannot be unfavorable to your love."

"Ah, Manicamp; a pretext, a good pretext; find me one."

"A pretext, by the Lord; a hundred pretexts! a thousand! If Malicorne were here he would have found you fifty thousand excellent ones already!"

"Who is Malicorne?" said De Guiche, shutting his eyes like a man thinking. "It seems to me I know that name."

"Know him! I should think so. You owe thirty thousand crowns to his father."

"Ah, yes; it is that worthy fellow from Orléans."

"Whom you promised a post in Monsieur's household; not the jealous husband, but the other."

"Well, since your friend Malicorne is so intelligent, let him suggest to me a way to gain Monsieur's adoration and a pretext to make my peace with him."

"Very well. I will speak to him about it."

"But who is that coming?"

"The Vicomte de Bragelonne."

"Raoul! Yes, indeed."

And De Guiche went rapidly forward to meet the young man.

"Is it you, my dear Raoul?" said De Guiche.

"Yes, I was looking for you to say good-bye," replied Raoul,

pressing the count's hand. "How do you do, M. Manicamp?"

"What! You are going away, vicomte?"

"Yes, on a mission for the King."

"Where are you going?"

"To London. From here I am going to Madame. She is to give me a letter for his Majesty King Charles II."

"You will find her alone, for Monsieur has gone out."

"Where has he gone?"

"To bathe."

"In that case, my dear friend, you, who are one of Monsieur's gentlemen, will make my excuses to him. I would have waited to take his commissions had not the desire for my prompt departure been intimated to me by M. Fouquet on behalf of his Majesty."

Manicamp touched De Guiche's elbow.

"There's your pretext," said he.

"What pretext?"

"M. de Bragelonne's excuses."

"A weak pretext," said De Guiche.

"An excellent one if Monsieur is not angry with you; no poorer than any other if he is."

"You are right, Manicamp. A pretext, whatever it may be, is all that I need. And so a pleasant journey to you, my dear Raoul."

And the two friends embraced.

Five minutes later Raoul entered Madame's apartments, as he had been asked to do by Mademoiselle de Montalais.

Madame was still seated at the table where she had written her letter. Before her still burned the rose-colored taper with which she had sealed it. In her preoccupation, for she seemed deeply engrossed, she had forgotten to extinguish the candle.

Bragelonne was expected. He had been at once announced.

Bragelonne was elegance itself. Once seen it was impossible to forget him. And not only had Madame seen him once, but it will be remembered that he was one of the first who had met her and had escorted her from Havre to Paris.

Madame, therefore, remembered him well.

"Ah," said she, "monsieur, you are going to see my brother, who will be delighted to pay the son a portion of the debt of gratitude he owes the father."

"The Comte de la Fère, Madame, has been amply recom-

pensed by the kindness his Majesty has shown him for the little service he was happy enough to render the King, and it is I who shall convey to him the assurance of the respect, the devotion, and the gratitude of both father and son."

"Do you know my brother, monsieur ?"

"No, your Highness. This will be the first time that I shall have had the pleasure of seeing his Majesty."

"You do not need to be recommended to him; but if you have any doubt as to your personal merit in his eyes, take me for your surety. I will not fail you."

"Your Highness is more than good."

"No, M. de Bragelonne; I remember that we travelled together, and I noticed your great wisdom in the midst of the greatest follies committed right and left by two of the greatest ninnies in the world, MM. de Guiche and Buckingham. Let us not speak of them, however, but of you. Are you going to England to seek a home? Forgive the question; it is prompted not by curiosity, but by a desire to be of service to you in any way I can."

"No, Madame; I am going to England on a mission for his Majesty. That is all."

"And you expect to return to France ?"

"As soon as this mission is fulfilled, unless his Majesty King Charles II. gives me further orders."

"He will beg you at least to remain with him as long as possible, I am sure."

"In that case, as I should not be able to refuse, I will beg your royal Highness to be good enough to remind the King of France that one of his most faithful servants is away from him."

"Take care that when he does recall you, you do not consider his order an abuse of power."

"I do not understand you, Madame."

"The court of France is without compare, I know, but we have some pretty women at the court of England, too."

Raoul smiled.

"Oh," said Madame, "yours is a smile which portends no good to my countrywomen. It is as though you were telling them, M. de Bragelonne, 'I have come to you, but I have left my heart on the other side of the channel.' Did not your smile signify that ?"

"Your Highness has the gift of reading the innermost depths

of the soul. You will understand, therefore, why at present any prolonged sojourn at the court of England would be a matter of regret to me."

"I need not ask if the love of so brave a knight is returned?"

"Madame, I was brought up with the one I love, and I believe that she has for me the same feelings that I have for her."

"Well, start quickly, M. de Bragelonne, and return quickly, and on your return we shall see two people made happy, for I hope there is no obstacle to your happiness?"

"There is a very great one, Madame."

"Indeed! what is it?"

"The King's wish."

"The King's wish? Does the King oppose your marriage?"

"At least he defers it. I asked the King's consent through the Comte de la Fère, and without exactly refusing, he said positively that it must be deferred."

"Is the one you love unworthy of you, then?"

"She is worthy of a king's love, Madame."

"I mean that perhaps she is not equal to you in birth."

"She is of excellent family."

"Young? beautiful?"

"She is seventeen, and in my eyes ravishingly beautiful."

"Is she in the country or in Paris?"

"She is at Fontainebleau, Madame."

"At court?"

"Yes."

"Do I know her?"

"She has the honor to belong to your royal Highness's household."

"Her name?" asked the princess, anxiously, "if," she added hastily, "her name is not a secret."

"No, Madame, my love is too pure for me to make a secret of it to any one, much less to your royal Highness, who has been so good to me. It is Mademoiselle Louise de la Vallière."

Madame could not restrain a cry in which there was something more than surprise.

"Ah," said she, "La Vallière — the one who yesterday —"

She paused, then continued:

"The one who yesterday was taken ill, I believe?"

"Yes, Madame; it was only this morning that I heard of the accident which had happened to her."

"Did you see her before coming here?"

"I had the honor to bid her good-bye."

"And you say," resumed Madame, making a violent effort, "that the King has—deferred your marriage with this girl?"

"Yes, Madame, deferred it."

"Did he give any reason for this postponement?"

"None."

"How long ago did the Comte de la Fère make the request?"

"More than a month ago, Madame."

"That is strange," said the princess.

And something like a shadow passed over her eyes.

"A month?" she repeated.

"Almost."

"You are right, M. le Vicomte," said the princess, with a smile in which Bragelonne might have noticed some restraint, "my brother must not keep you too long; start immediately, then, and in the first letter I write to England I will claim you in the name of the King."

And Madame rose to place her letter in Bragelonne's hands. Raoul understood that his audience was at an end. He took the letter, bowed to the princess, and withdrew.

"A month!" murmured the princess. "Could I have been blind, then, to such an extent, and could he have loved her for a month?"

As Madame had nothing to do she began to write to her brother the letter the postscript of which was to recall Bragelonne.

The Comte de Guiche, as we have seen, had yielded to the persistency of Manicamp and had allowed himself to be led to the stables, where they ordered their horses saddled; then by the little path which we have already described to our readers, they advanced to meet Monsieur, who, fresh from his bath, was returning to the château. He wore over his face a woman's veil to prevent the sun, already hot, from burning his skin.

Monsieur was in one of those fits of good humor caused occasionally by the appreciation of his beauty. In the water he had been able to compare the whiteness of his body with that of his courtiers, and thanks to the care which his royal High-

ness took of himself, no one, not even the Chevalier de Lorraine, could sustain the comparison.

Moreover, Monsieur had attained a certain success in swimming, and the salutary exercise of his muscles in the fresh water kept his mind and body in a state of equilibrium. So at sight of De Guiche, who was galloping towards him on a magnificent white horse, he could not restrain an exclamation of delight.

"It seems to me that everything looks favorable," said Manicamp, who fancied he could read this kindly feeling on the face of his royal Highness.

"Good-day, my poor De Guiche! Good-day!" exclaimed the prince.

"Greeting to Monseigneur," replied De Guiche, encouraged by Philippe's tone of voice. "Health, joy, happiness, and prosperity to your Highness!"

"Welcome, De Guiche! Take my right, but check your horse, for I wish to return at a walk, under this fresh shade."

"At your service, my lord."

And De Guiche rode on the prince's right as he had been asked to do.

"Now, my dear De Guiche," said the prince, "come, give us some news about that De Guiche whom I once knew and who was so attentive to my wife."

De Guiche blushed to the whites of his eyes, while Monsieur burst into a laugh as if he had made the wittiest speech in the world.

The few privileged courtiers who surrounded Monsieur thought they were expected to laugh too, although they had not heard his words, and burst into a noisy laugh, starting with the first and going through the whole company.

Red as he was, De Guiche put a good face on the matter; Manicamp looked at him.

"Ah, my lord," replied De Guiche, "be charitable to a poor wretch; do not sacrifice me to M. le Chevalier de Lorraine."

"What do you mean?"

"If he hears you ridiculing me he will go farther than your Highness and will show me no mercy."

"About your love for the princess?"

"For pity's sake, my lord!"

"Come, come, De Guiche, admit that you did make eyes at Madame."

"I shall never admit such a thing, my lord."

"Out of respect to me? Well, I release you from the respect, De Guiche. Confess, as if it were a question of Mademoiselle de Chalais or of Mademoiselle de la Vallière."

Then, interrupting himself:

"Come," said he, beginning to laugh again, "I played with a two-edged sword. I struck you and my brother at the same time, Chalais and La Vallière, your fiancée and his future lady-love."

"Really, my lord," said the count, "you are in a delightful humor to-day."

"Yes, indeed. I feel well, and then the sight of you gives me pleasure."

"Thanks, my lord."

"Were you angry with me?"

"I, my lord?"

"Yes."

"For what reason?"

"Because I interrupted your sarabands and your other Spanish dances."

"Oh, your Highness!"

"No, do not deny it. You left the princess that day with glaring eyes. That brought you bad luck, my dear fellow, for you danced the ballet yesterday horribly. Don't get sulky, De Guiche, it spoils you and makes you look like a bear. Had the princess seen you yesterday I am sure of one thing —"

"Of what is that, my lord? Your Highness frightens me."

"She would have completely given you up."

And the prince burst into fresh laughter.

"Decidedly," thought Manicamp, "rank makes no difference; every one is alike."

The prince continued:

"Well, you have returned, and so it is to be hoped that the chevalier will become amiable again."

"How so, my lord? By what miracle could I have such influence over M. de Lorraine?"

"It is very simple. He is jealous of you."

"Bah! Really?"

"Yes, it is true."

"He does me too much honor."

"You understand that where you are, there he caresses me, when you are gone he makes a perfect martyr of me. I am

sometimes up, sometimes down. Moreover, you don't know what an idea I have."

"I don't even suspect, my lord."

"Well, when you were in exile — for you really were exiled, my poor De Guiche."

"Zounds, my lord! whose fault was it?" said De Guiche, feigning anger.

"Certainly not mine, my dear count," replied his royal Highness. "I did not ask the King to exile you, on my honor as a prince."

"Not you, my lord, I am fully aware, but —"

"But Madame? Oh, as to that, I can't say no. What the devil did you do to her?"

"Really, Monsieur —"

"Wives have their judges, I know, and mine is not exempt. But even if she did have you exiled I was not angry with you."

"In that case, my lord," said De Guiche, "I am not wholly unhappy."

Manicamp, who was riding behind De Guiche and who had not lost a word of what the prince had been saying, bent forward on his horse's neck to hide the laugh which he could not repress.

"Besides, your exile gave me an idea."

"Good!"

"When the chevalier, seeing that you were no longer around, and sure of reigning alone, began to bulldoze me, I noticed, in spite of this bad fellow, that my wife was amiable and good to me notwithstanding my neglect; I decided therefore to become a model husband, a rarity at court. It occurred to me to fall in love with my wife."

De Guiche looked at the prince with a stupefied air which was not assumed.

"Oh, my lord," stammered De Guiche, trembling, "that idea did not really come to you, did it?"

"Indeed it did. I have some property given to me by my brother on my marriage. She has a good deal of money, since she gets it both from her English brother and her French brother-in-law. Well, we should have left court. I should have retired to the château of Villers-Cotterets, one of my estates in the midst of a forest, where we should have enjoyed a most perfect love, as my grandfather Henri IV. did there

with the fair Gabrielle. What do you say to that idea, De Guiche?"

"It's enough to make one tremble, my lord," said De Guiche, who actually was shivering.

"Ah, I see that you could not support a second exile."

"I, my lord?"

"So I shall not take you with us as I at first thought of doing."

"I with you, my lord?"

"Yes, if it should occur to me again to be out of sorts with the court."

"Oh, my lord, in any case I would follow your Highness to the end of the world."

"Stupid!" growled Manicamp, urging his horse towards De Guiche so as almost to unseat him. Then riding close, as if he were not master of his steed, he said in a low tone:

"Think of what you are saying."

"Well," said the prince, "it is agreed. Since you are so devoted to me I shall take you with me."

"Anywhere, my lord, anywhere!" replied De Guiche, joyously. "Anywhere, and at once! Are you ready?"

And De Guiche laughingly gave his horse the rein and galloped a few yards ahead.

"One moment," said the prince, "let us go to the château."

"What for?"

"Why to get my wife."

"What?" demanded De Guiche.

"Certainly. I told you it was a prospect of conjugal affection. Of course I must take my wife."

"In that case, my lord," replied the count, "I am in despair, but there is no De Guiche for you."

"Bah!"

"Truly. Why do you take Madame?"

"Because I find that I love her."

De Guiche turned slightly pale, but endeavored to preserve his apparent cheerfulness.

"If you love Madame, my lord," said he, "that love ought to suffice, and you have no further need of your friends."

"That's not bad," murmured Manicamp.

"Come! There is your fear of Madame seizing you again," replied the prince.

"Well, my lord, I have paid for that. She was the cause of my exile."

"Tut, tut! what an evil nature you have, De Guiche! How spiteful you are!"

"I should like to see you in the same position, my lord!"

"Decidedly. That was why you danced so badly yesterday. You wished to avenge yourself by making Madame take false steps. Ah, De Guiche, that is very paltry and I shall tell Madame of it."

"You may tell her anything you please, my lord. Her Highness cannot hate me more than she does already."

"There! There! You are exaggerating because of the fortnight you were forced to spend in the country."

"My lord, a fortnight is a fortnight, and when one is bored to death the entire time a fortnight is an eternity."

"So that you will not forgive her?"

"Never."

"Come, come, De Guiche, be a better fellow! I will make your peace with her. You will see, if you are with her, that she has no evil traits, and that she is very intelligent."

"My lord —"

"You will see that she knows how to receive like a princess and laugh like one of the people; you will see that when she chooses she makes the hours pass like minutes. De Guiche, my friend, you must make up with my wife."

"Actually," said Manicamp to himself, "here's a man whose wife's very name will bring him ill luck; and the late King Candaules was a veritable tiger in comparison with Monsieur."

"At any rate, De Guiche," added the prince, "you will make up with my wife. I guarantee it. Only I must show you how to do it. There is nothing ordinary about her, and not every one is to her liking."

"My lord —"

"No resistance, De Guiche, or I shall get angry," replied the prince.

"Since he wants it," whispered Manicamp into De Guiche's ear, "satisfy him."

"My lord," said the count, "I obey."

"And to begin with," continued the prince, "there will be cards this evening at Madame's. You will dine with me and I shall take you there."

"Oh, as to that, my lord," objected De Guiche, "you will permit me to decline."

"Again! Why, this is rebellion."

"Madame received me too badly yesterday before every one."

"Indeed," said the prince, laughing.

"So much so that she did not even answer me when I spoke to her; perhaps it may be well to have no pride, but too little is not sufficient, as they say."

"Count, after dinner you will go to your own apartments and dress. Then you will come for me. I shall wait for you."

"Since your Highness positively commands —"

"Positively."

"He will not lose his hold," said Manicamp. "This is the very sort of thing to which husbands cling most obstinately. Ah, why could not M. Molière have heard this! He would have put it into verse if he had."

Thus chatting, the prince and his suite reëntered the coolest apartments of the château.

"By the way," said De Guiche on the threshold, "I had a message for your royal Highness."

"Deliver it."

"M. de Bragelonne has left for London by order of the King, and he charged me to pay his respects to you, my lord."

"A pleasant journey to the vicomte, whom I like very much. Now go and dress yourself, De Guiche, and come back. If you do not —"

"What will happen, my lord?"

"I shall have you thrown into the Bastille."

"Well," said De Guiche, laughing, "his royal Highness is the counterpart of her royal Highness. Madame had me exiled because she liked me too little; Monsieur has me imprisoned because he likes me too well. Thanks, Monsieur! Thanks, Madame!"

"Come, come!" said the prince, "you are a delightful fellow and you know perfectly well that I can't do without you. Return quickly."

"Very well. But it pleases me to play the coquette in my turn, my lord."

"Bah!"

"And I shall not return to your Highness save on one condition."

"What is it?"

"I want to oblige the friend of one of my friends."

"What is his name?"

"Malicorne."

"An ugly name."

"Very well borne, my lord."

"That may be; well?"

"Well, I owe M. Malicorne a place in your household, my lord."

"What kind of place?"

"Any kind; a post as supervisor, for instance."

"Ah! That is fortunate. Yesterday I dismissed the usher of my apartments."

"He will do for that, my lord. What are the duties?"

"None, except to serve and to report."

"A detective?"

"Exactly."

"How well that will suit Malicorne!" ventured Manicamp.

"Do you know the man of whom we are speaking, M. Manicamp?" asked the prince.

"Intimately, my lord. He is my friend."

"And your opinion is?"

"That you never had a better usher than he will make."

"How much does the position pay?" asked the count of the prince.

"I don't know; but I've always been told that if he kept busy he could n't be paid enough."

"What do you mean by being busy, prince?"

"That needs no explanation if the individual is a man of sense."

"In that case I think that you will be content, my lord, for Malicorne is as clever as the devil."

"Good! Then the office will be an expensive one for me," replied the prince, laughing. "You are making me a veritable present, count."

"I think so, my lord."

"Well, go and announce to your M. Mélicorne —"

"Malicorne, my lord."

"I'll never get used to that name."

"You say Manicamp without any trouble, my lord."

"Yes, and I would say Manicorne very well too. Habit would aid me."

"Well, my lord, I promise you that your inspector of apartments will not be angry. He has the happiest disposition imaginable."

"In that case, my dear De Guiche, tell him of his appointment. But wait —"

"What is it, my lord?"

"I wish to see him beforehand. If he is as ugly as his name I shall retract."

"My lord, you know him."

"I?"

"Yes, you have already seen him at the Palais-Royal. It was I myself who presented him to you."

"Ah, I remember. The deuce! He was a charming fellow."

"I knew that you must have noticed him, my lord."

"Yes, yes. You see, De Guiche, I do not wish either my wife or myself to have ugly people about us. My wife will have her maids of honor pretty; I, all my gentlemen good-looking. In this way, you see, De Guiche, if I beget children they will be the result of a good inspiration, and if my wife bears them she will have had before her handsome models."

"That is good logic, my lord," said Manicamp, showing his approval by his look as well as by his words.

As for De Guiche, he probably found the logic less to his liking, for he merely gave his opinion by a gesture which might have been variously interpreted.

Manicamp went to inform Malicorne of the good news he had just heard.

De Guiche seemed disinclined to go away to make his toilet.

Monsieur, singing, laughing, and admiring himself, awaited his dinner hour in a mood that would have justified the proverb, "as happy as a prince."

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE STORY OF A NAIAD AND OF A DRYAD.

EVERY one had been present at the collation in the château, and afterwards had donned court costumes.

The collation was usually held at five o'clock. Let us allow an hour for that, and two hours for the dressing. Every one was ready, then, at about eight in the evening.

Towards that hour the guests began to arrive at Mad-

ame's, for, as we have already said, Madame was receiving that evening.

Every one was careful not to miss Madame's receptions, for the evenings in her apartments had all the charm which the Queen, that pious and excellent princess, failed to give hers.

It is unfortunately one of the attributes of goodness of heart to be less amusing than ill-nature. And yet, let us hasten to add, malicious was not an epithet that could be applied to Madame. Her nature, of the highest type, comprised too much generosity, too many reliable impulses and lofty thoughts to be called evil.

But Madame had the gift of resistance, a gift so often fatal to the one who possesses it, for it breaks where another would have bent. The result was that blows did not become deadened on her as on that wadded conscience of Maria Teresa. Her heart rebounded at each attack, and like the aggressive quintains in the merry-go-rounds, if she were attacked most fiercely, she returned blow for blow to any impudent person, whoever he was, who dared to tilt against her.

Was this maliciousness or simply mischief? We think that the rich and powerful natures are the ones that, like the tree of knowledge, produce both good and evil: a double branch, always flourishing, always fruitful, whose good fruit can be detected by those who are hungry; whose evil fruit poisons the cumberers and the parasites — a result that is not bad.

Madame, therefore, who had in her mind the well-formed plan of being second or even first queen, made her receptions delightful with conversation, opportunities of meeting, and the perfect freedom of speech which she allowed every guest, on the sole condition that what was uttered was either pleasing or useful. One will readily understand that, therefore, there was perhaps less talking at Madame's than elsewhere.

Madame hated magpies and avenged herself cruelly on them. She let them speak.

She hated pretension, too, and did not pardon this fault even in the King. It was a malady of Monsieur's, and Madame had undertaken the gigantic task of curing him of it.

As for the rest, — poets, wits, beautiful women, — all were received by her like a mistress superior to her slaves; pensive enough in her liveliest moments to make poets meditate, strong enough in her attractions to shine even in the midst of the

loveliest, witty enough for the most distinguished to listen to her with delight.

It will readily be believed that evenings such as were held at Madame's must have attracted every one. Young people flocked there. When the King is young everybody is young at court.

So old ladies, the strong-minded women of the Regency or of the last reign, sulked; but others answered their pouting by laughing at those venerable individuals who had carried their love of authority so far as to command bodies of soldiers in the war of the Fronde, in order, as Madame said, not to lose their influence over men.

As eight o'clock struck, her royal Highness entered the great drawing-room with her ladies-in-waiting, and found several courtiers already there who had been waiting some minutes. Among these who had arrived in advance of the appointed time, she looked around for one who she thought ought to have been the first of all to arrive; but she did not find him.

However, almost at the same moment that she finished her investigation, Monsieur was announced.

Monsieur was splendid to behold. All the precious stones of Cardinal Mazarin, which of course the minister could not do otherwise than leave, all the jewels of the queen mother, as well as some of his wife's, — Monsieur wore them all that evening and shone like the sun.

Behind him, with hesitating step, and an air of contrition perfectly assumed, came De Guiche, in a costume of pearl-gray velvet embroidered in silver and trimmed with blue ribbons. He also wore lace as beautiful in its way as the jewels of Monsieur were in theirs. The plume in his hat was red.

Madame had several colors. She liked red for embroidery, gray for clothes, and blue for flowers.

M. de Guiche, dressed as he was, was so handsome that every one noticed him. Having a certain paleness of complexion, a languor in the eyes, white hands beneath their deep lace, a melancholy mouth, — it was only necessary, in fact, to see M. de Guiche to admit that few men at the court of France were equal to him.

The result was that Monsieur, who had the pretension to think he eclipsed the stars, if a star had been adorned like him, was, on the contrary, completely eclipsed in all minds,

which are silent judges certainly, but very firm in their conviction.

Madame looked at De Guiche vaguely; but vague as was her glance, it brought a delightful color to his face. In fact, Madame found De Guiche so handsome and so elegant that she almost ceased regretting the royal conquest which she felt was on the point of slipping away from her. Her heart, therefore, in spite of herself, sent all her blood to her cheeks.

Monsieur, assuming his playful manner, approached her. He had not seen the blush of the princess, or if he did see it he was far from attributing it to its true cause.

"Madame," said he, kissing his wife's hand, "there is present one who has fallen into disgrace, a wretched exile whom I have taken upon myself to recommend to you. Remember, I entreat you, that he is one of my best friends, and that your reception of him will touch me deeply."

"What exile? What disgraced person?" asked Madame, looking about her without glancing at the count any more than at the others.

This was the moment to push forward his *protégé*. The prince stepped aside and let De Guiche pass, who with a tolerably well-assumed awkwardness of manner approached Madame and made his bow.

"What!" said Madame, as though she felt the greatest surprise, "is M. de Guiche the disgraced one, the exile?"

"Yes, certainly," said the duke.

"Why," said Madame, "he is the only one to be seen here."

"Ah, Madame, you are unjust," said the prince.

"I?"

"Yes. Come, forgive the poor fellow."

"Forgive him for what? What have I to forgive, M. de Guiche?"

"Explain yourself, De Guiche. What do you wish to be forgiven for?" asked the prince.

"Alas! her royal Highness knows very well what it is," replied the latter, hypocritically.

"Come, come, give him your hand, Madame," said Philippe.

"If it will give you pleasure, Monsieur."

And with an indescribable movement of her eyes and shoulders, Madame extended her beautiful, perfumed hand to the young man, who pressed his lips to it.

He must have held it for some time and Madame did not withdraw it any too quickly, for the prince added :

"De Guiche is not wicked, Madame, and, certainly will not bite you."

In the gallery they took advantage of this remark, which was perhaps not very witty, to laugh to excess. In fact, the situation was remarkable, and some kindly disposed persons had noticed it. Monsieur was still enjoying the effect of his remark when the King was announced.

The appearance of the room at that moment was as we are about to describe :

In the centre, before the fireplace, which was filled with flowers, stood Madame, with her maids of honor formed in two wings, about which flitted the court butterflies.

Other groups occupied the recesses of the windows like soldiers of the same garrison in their towers, and from their respective places they could hear the remarks of the principal group.

From one of these groups, the one nearest to the fireplace, Malicorne, promoted by Manicamp and De Guiche to the post of master of the apartments, — Malicorne, whose official costume had been ready for two months, was brilliant with gold lace and beamed on Montalais, at the extreme left of Madame, with all the fire of his eyes and all the splendor of his velvet.

Madame was talking with Mademoiselle de Châtillon and Mademoiselle de Créqui, who stood near her, and addressing a few words to Monsieur, who drew aside as soon as the King was announced.

Mademoiselle de la Vallière, like Montalais, was on Madame's left, that is, the last but one on the line ; on her right was Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente. She was placed, therefore, like certain bodies of troops whose weakness is suspected, and who are placed between two tried regiments.

Thus flanked by the two companions of her adventure, La Vallière, whether she felt grief at Raoul's departure, or was moved by the recent events which were beginning to make her name familiar in the world of courtiers, — La Vallière, we repeat, hid her red eyes behind her fan, and seemed to pay great attention to the words which Montalais and Athenais alternately whispered to her from time to time.

When the King's name was announced, a general movement took place in the apartment.

Madame, as hostess, rose to receive her royal visitor, but notwithstanding her preoccupation of mind, as she rose she glanced hastily to her right: her glance, which the presumptuous De Guiche interpreted as being intended for him, rested as it made the tour of the circle on La Vallière, whose blush and nervousness she instantly perceived.

The King entered the midst of the group, which had become a general one, by a movement which naturally took place from the circumference to the centre. Every head bowed before his Majesty, the ladies bending like frail, beautiful lilies before King Aquilo.

His Majesty had nothing severe, we might even say nothing royal, about him that evening except his youth and good looks. A certain air of joyousness and good humor awoke every brain, and every one promised himself a delightful evening, if only from having seen his Majesty's desire to amuse himself at Madame's. If any one by his joyousness and good humor could equal the King, it was M. de Saint-Aignan, in his rose-colored costume, with face, ribbons, and especially his ideas all rose-colored, and that morning Saint-Aignan had had many ideas. That which had given a new bloom to all the ideas which germinated in his fertile mind was that he had just seen that Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente was, like himself, dressed in rose-color. We would not wish to say, however, that the wily courtier had not known beforehand that the beautiful Athenais was to wear that color; for he well knew the art of making a tailor or a lady's maid speak as to her mistress's plans. He sent as many killing glances to Mademoiselle Athenais as he had bows of ribbon on his hose and doublet, — that is, he let fly an enormous number.

The King having paid his compliments to Madame, and Madame having asked him to be seated, the circle was immediately formed. Louis asked Monsieur the news of the bathing, and stated, looking at the ladies, that some poets were engaged in turning into verse the charming diversion of the baths of Valvins, and that one of them particularly, M. Loret, seemed to have received the confidence of a water-nymph, so much truth there was in his verses.

More than one lady felt she ought to blush.

The King took advantage of this moment to look about at

his ease. Montalais alone was not blushing too much to look at the King, and she saw him devour Mademoiselle de la Vallière with his glance.

This bold maid of honor called La Montalais forced the King to lower his gaze, thus saving Louise de la Vallière from a sympathetic fire which might possibly come to her from that glance. Louis was appropriated by Madame, who overwhelmed him with inquiries, and no one in the world could question as she could.

He tried, however, to render the conversation general, and in order to succeed, he redoubled his wit and attention. Madame longed for compliments, and determined to have them at any cost; turning to the King, she said:

"Sire, your Majesty, who knows everything which occurs in your kingdom, ought to know in advance the verses told to M. Loret by this nymph. Will your Majesty share them with us?"

"Madame," replied the King with perfect grace, "I dare not — certainly you personally would be embarrassed at hearing certain details. But Saint-Aignan tells a story well and remembers the lines perfectly; if he does not remember them he improvises them. I can certify that he is a full-fledged poet."

Saint-Aignan, brought forward, was constrained to show himself off to the best advantage. Unfortunately for Madame, however, he thought only of his own private affairs, so that, instead of paying Madame the compliments she enjoyed, he was intent on showing himself off as much as possible in his good fortune.

He glanced therefore for the hundredth time at the beautiful Athenais, who had been carrying out her theory of the previous evening, that is, of not deigning to look at her adorer.

"Sire," said he, "your Majesty will surely pardon me for not having remembered very well the verses dictated to Loret by the nymph; but where the King has remembered nothing what could I do?"

Madame did not receive this failure of the courtier very favorably.

"Ah, Madame," added Saint-Aignan, "at present it is no longer a question as to what the water-nymphs say. Truly, one would be tempted to believe that nothing of any interest any longer happens in the liquid realms. Ah! it is upon the earth, Madame, that important events happen. Ah, Madame, upon the earth how many stories full of —"

"Good!" said Madame, "and what is taking place on the earth?"

"That must be asked of the dryads," replied the count; "the dryads inhabit the forest, as your royal Highness knows."

"I know, too, that they are naturally great talkers, M. de Saint-Aignan."

"It is true, Madame, but when they say only pleasant things, it would be ungracious to accuse them of talking too much."

"Do they say pleasant things?" demanded the princess, carelessly. "Really, M. de Saint-Aignan, you excite my curiosity, and were I the King I would require you at once to tell us the pleasant things the dryads say, since you alone seem to understand their language."

"Oh, as to that, Madame, I am wholly at his Majesty's orders," replied the count, quickly.

"He understands the language of dryads?" said Monsieur.

"How fortunate that Saint-Aignan is!"

"I understand it as I do French, my lord."

"Tell it to us, then," said Madame.

The King felt embarrassed; his confidant was no doubt about to embark in a difficult undertaking. He felt this from the general attention aroused by Saint-Aignan's preamble, excited, too, by Madame's peculiar manner. The most discreet seemed ready to devour every word the count was about to utter. They coughed, they drew more closely together, they glanced sidewise at certain maids of honor, who, in order to bear with greater modesty or steadiness the inquisitive looks, arranged their fans and assumed the bearing of a duellist about to be exposed to his adversary's fire.

In those days the habit of ingenious conversations and dangerous anecdotes so prevailed that at a place where in a modern drawing-room many would begin to suspect some scandal, some disclosure, or tragedy, and would flee in dismay, Madame's guests settled themselves in their places in order not to lose a word or gesture of the comedy composed for their benefit by M. de Saint-Aignan, and the termination of which, whatever its style and plot, must of necessity be perfectly proper.

The count was known for a polished man and a perfect story-teller. He therefore began bravely in the midst of a profound silence, which would have been formidable for any one else.

"Madame, the King permits me, first, to address myself to your royal Highness, since you admit yourself to be the most inquisitive person of your circle; I shall therefore have the honor of telling your royal Highness that the dryad more particularly inhabits the hollows of oaks, and as dryads are beautiful mythological creatures, they inhabit the most beautiful trees, that is, the largest they can find." At this exordium, which recalled, under a transparent veil, the celebrated story of the royal oak, which had played so important a part in the last evening, so many hearts beat from joy or nervousness that if Saint-Aignan had not had a good and sonorous voice their throbbing might have been heard above his voice.

"There must be dryads at Fontainebleau, then," said Madame, calmly, "for never in my life have I seen such beautiful oaks as in the royal park."

As she spoke she sent straight to De Guiche a glance of which he had no reason to complain, as he had had of the former one, which was couched with a certain shade of vagueness very painful for so loving a heart as his.

"Precisely, Madame; it is of Fontainebleau I was about to speak to your royal Highness," said Saint-Aignan, "for the dryad in whose story we are interested lives in his Majesty's château."

The affair was started; the action begun, neither listeners nor narrator could draw back.

"Let us hear it," said Madame, "for the story seems to me to have not only all the charm of a national incident, but still more of a recent occurrence."

"I must begin at the beginning," said the count. "At Fontainebleau, then, in a cottage of beautiful appearance, live some shepherds.

"One is the shepherd Tyrcis, to whom belongs the richest estates, transmitted to him from his parents, by inheritance. Tyrcis is young and handsome, and his many good qualities make him the first shepherd in the land."

A slight murmur of approbation encouraged the narrator, who continued:

"His strength equals his courage; no one has greater skill in hunting wild beasts, no one more wisdom in the councils. When he rides a horse over the beautiful plains he has inherited, or when he joins in games of skill and strength with the shepherds who obey him, one would say that the god Mars were

hurling his lance on the plains of Thrace, or, better still, that Apollo, the god of day, shone down upon the earth with his flaming darts."

Every one understood that this allegorical portrait of the King was not the worst exordium the story-teller could have chosen; consequently the effect was lost neither upon those present who either from duty or pleasure applauded it to the echo, or on the King himself, to whom flattery when delicate was very pleasing, and which was never displeasing even when it was a little too broad. Saint-Aignan continued:

"It is not only in games of glory, ladies, that the shepherd Tyrcis acquired this renown, which made him the king of shepherds."

"Of the shepherds of Fontainebleau," said the King, smilingly, to Madame.

"Oh," cried Madame, "Fontainebleau is arbitrarily chosen by the poet, but I should say of the shepherds of the whole world."

The King forgot his rôle of passive listener and bowed.

"It is," pursued Saint-Aignan, amidst a flattering murmur, "it is with ladies especially that the good qualities of this king of the shepherds show at their best. He is a shepherd whose mind is as fine as his heart is pure; he can pay a compliment with inimitable charm; he knows how to love with a discretion that ensures an enviable lot to his amiable and fortunate conquests. Never a word of disclosure; never an instant of forgetfulness. Whoever has seen and heard Tyrcis must love him; whoever loves him and is loved by him has found happiness."

Saint-Aignan paused. He was enjoying the pleasure of making these compliments, and this portrait, grotesquely exaggerated as it was, had found such favor, especially in certain ears, that the good qualities of the shepherd did not seem overdrawn.

Madame begged the orator to continue.

"Tyrcis," said the count, "had a faithful companion, or rather a devoted subject, called — Amyntas."

"Ah, now we shall have the portrait of Amyntas," said Madame, mischievously; "you are so good a painter, M. de Saint-Aignan."

"Madame —"

"Oh, count, do not sacrifice this poor Amyntas, I beg of you. I should never forgive you."

"Madame, Amyntas is of too humble a position, especially beside Tyreis, for his person to deserve the honor of a comparison. There are certain friends, like the servants of olden time, who had themselves buried alive at the feet of their masters. The place of Amyntas is at the feet of Tyreis. He claims no other, and if sometimes the illustrious hero —"

"Illustrious shepherd, you mean," said Madame, pretending to correct M. de Saint-Aignan.

"Your royal Highness is right — I was mistaken," said the courtier. "If, I say, the shepherd Tyreis deigns sometimes to call Amyntas his friend and to open his heart to him, it is an unparalleled favor which the latter regards as exceeding happiness."

"All that," interrupted Madame, "establishes the absolute devotion of Amyntas to Tyreis, but does not give us the portrait of Amyntas. Count, do not flatter him, if you do not wish, but describe him to us. I will have the portrait of Amyntas."

Saint-Aignan, having bowed profoundly to his Majesty's sister-in-law, obeyed.

"Amyntas," said he, "is a little older than Tyreis. He is a shepherd not wholly unfavored by Nature; it is even said that the Muses deigned to smile upon him at his birth as Hebe smiles upon youth. He has no ambition to shine, he wants only to be loved, and perhaps if he were well known he would not be found wholly unworthy."

This latter speech, strengthened by a killing glance, was directed straight at M^{lle} de Tonnay-Charente, who bore the shock unmoved.

But the modesty and the cleverness of the allusion had produced a good effect. Amyntas received his reward in applause, for which Tyreis himself gave the signal by a kindly nod.

"Now," continued Saint-Aignan, "Tyreis and Amyntas were walking together one evening in the forest, talking of their disappointments in love. Note, ladies, that this is already the story of the dryads; otherwise we should know what was said by Tyreis and Amyntas, the two most discreet shepherds in the world. They sought the densest part of the forest in order to be alone, to talk more freely of their troubles, when suddenly the sound of voices reached their ears."

"Ah!" exclaimed those about the narrator; "nothing could be more interesting."

At this point Madame, like a vigilant general inspecting his army, glanced at Montalais and Tonnay-Charente, who were embarrassed by her gaze.

"These harmonious voices," resumed Saint-Aignan, "were those of some shepherdesses who had also desired to enjoy the cool shade, and who, knowing of this isolated and almost inaccessible place, had gone there to exchange their ideas upon sheepfolds."

A great burst of laughter, caused by these words of Saint-Aignan, an almost imperceptible smile on the face of the King, who was watching Tonnay-Charente, were the results of this sally.

"The dryad," continued Saint-Aignan, "states that the shepherdesses were three in number, and that all three were young and beautiful."

"Their names?" asked Madame, tranquilly.

"Their names!" said Saint-Aignan, who hesitated before committing this indiscretion.

"Yes; you have called your shepherds Tyrcis and Amyntas; give names to your shepherdesses."

"Oh, Madame! I am no inventor, no troubadour of the olden times. I tell what the dryad could dictate."

"What did your dryad call these shepherdesses? Really, you have a very treacherous memory. Had your dryad fallen out with the Muse Mnemosyne?"

"Madame, these shepherdesses — you must know that it is a crime to reveal the names of women."

"From which a woman absolves you, count, on condition that you give the names of these shepherdesses."

"They were called Phyllis, Amaryllis, and Galatea."

"Good! They have not lost by waiting," said Madame.

"Those are three charming names. Now their portraits."

Again Saint-Aignan hesitated.

"Yes, let us proceed in due form, I beg of you, count," went on Madame. "Ought we not, Sire, to have the portraits of the shepherdesses?"

The King, who had expected this insistence and who was beginning to feel somewhat nervous, did not deem it wise to provoke so dangerous a questioner. He thought, moreover, that Saint-Aignan in his description would find a way to insert some delicate compliments which would please the ears of one whom his Majesty was anxious to charm. It was with this

hope as well as with this fear that Louis authorized Saint-Aignan to sketch the portraits of the shepherdesses, Phyllis, Amaryllis, and Galatea.

"Well, then, so be it," said Saint-Aignan, like a man who has made up his mind.

And he began.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

CONCLUSION OF THE STORY OF A NAIAD AND OF A DRYAD.

"PHYLLIS," said Saint-Aignan, giving Montalais a defiant look such as a fencing-master would give when asking a rival worthy of him to put himself on guard, "Phyllis is neither dark nor fair, neither large nor small, neither grave nor gay; shepherdess that she is, she is as charming as a princess and as coquettish as an imp. Her sight is excellent, everything that comes within range of her vision her heart desires. She is like a bird which, always warbling, now skims the ground, now rises fluttering in pursuit of a butterfly, now perches in the top of a tree whence it defies every bird catcher either to come and take it or to lure it into their nets."

The description was so accurate that all eyes turned on Montalais, who, with steady gaze and head erect, was listening to M. de Saint-Aignan as though he were speaking of an utter stranger.

"Is that all, M. de Saint-Aignan?" asked the princess.

"Oh, your royal Highness, this is only a sketch. Many more details could be given, but I fear to tax your Highness's patience or to wound the modesty of the shepherdess. I shall, therefore, pass on to her companion, Amaryllis."

"Yes," said Madame. "Pass on to Amaryllis, M. de Saint-Aignan. We will follow you."

"Amaryllis is the eldest of the three, and yet," Saint-Aignan hastened to add, "her great age does not amount to twenty years."

Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente, who at the beginning of the story had frowned, now unbent her brows with a slight smile.

"She is tall, with a quantity of hair which she arranges

in a knot after the manner of Greek statues; her gait is majestic, her bearing haughty; she has, therefore, the air of a goddess rather than that of a simple mortal, and among the goddesses the one she most resembles is Diana, the huntress, — with this sole difference: that the cruel shepherdess having stolen one day the quiver of Love while poor Cupid was sleeping in a thicket of roses, instead of sending her arrows against the hosts of the forests, discharges them pitilessly against all poor shepherds who pass within range of her bow and her eyes."

"Oh, the wicked shepherdess!" said Madame; "she will probably some day wound herself with one of the arrows which she is discharging so pitilessly right and left!"

"Such is the hope of shepherds in general," said Saint-Aignan.

"And that of Amyntas in particular, is it not?" asked Madame.

"The shepherd Amyntas is so timid," said Saint-Aignan, with the most modest air he could assume, "that if he has such a hope no one has ever known it, for he hides it in the depths of his heart."

A most flattering murmur welcomed this profession of devotion on the part of the shepherd.

"And Galatea?" asked Madame. "I am impatient to see so skilful a hand take up the portrait where Virgil left it and finish it for us."

"Madame," said Saint-Aignan, "beside the great Vergilius Maro your humble servant is but a poor poet. However, encouraged by your commands, I shall do my best."

"We are listening," said Madame.

Saint-Aignan extended his foot and hand, and began:

"White as milk, as golden as are ears of corn, she shakes in the air the perfume of her blond hair. Then one wonders if she is not beautiful Europa who awoke love in Jupiter when she played with her companions among the flowering fields.

"In her eyes, as blue as a summer sky, shines a soft light; reverie nurtures it, love dispenses it. When she frowns or bends her looks on the ground the sun veils itself in token of mourning.

"When she smiles, on the contrary, all Nature resumes her joy, and the birds, silent for a time, recommence their songs in the midst of the trees.

"She," said Saint-Aignan, in conclusion, "is worthy the admiration of every one; and if ever she should give away her heart, happy the one of whom her maiden love consents to make a god!"

On hearing this description, which had been listened to by all, Madame contented herself by showing her approval of the most poetic point by nodding her head, but it was impossible to say whether the marks of assent were given for the ability of the narrator or for the resemblance of the portrait.

The result was that since Madame did not applaud openly, no one else did, not even Monsieur, who in his heart thought that Saint-Aignan dwelt too much at length on the portraits of the shepherdesses, and passed over too quickly those of the shepherds. The whole assembly seemed chilled. Saint-Aignan, who had exhausted his rhetoric and his materials in sketching the portrait of Galatea, and who, after the favor which the other descriptions had received, had expected to hear loud applause greet the last, was colder *even* than the King and the rest of the company. There was an instant's silence, finally broken by Madame.

"Well, Sire," she asked, "what does your Majesty say to these portraits?"

The King wished to come to the aid of Saint-Aignan without compromising himself.

"Why, in my opinion Amaryllis is beautiful," said he.

"I prefer Phyllis," said Monsieur, "she is a good girl, or rather a good fellow of a nymph."

Every one laughed.

This time the looks were so direct that Montalais felt the blood mount to her brow in vivid flushes.

"And," resumed Madame, "these shepherdesses were saying—?"

But Saint-Aignan, whose pride had been hurt, was in no frame of mind to sustain an attack by fresh and rested troops.

"Madame," said he, "the shepherdesses were confiding to one another their little preferences."

"Come, M. de Saint-Aignan, you are a river of pastoral poetry," said Madame, with an amiable smile which somewhat comforted the story-teller.

"They were saying that love was dangerous, but that lack of it was death to the heart."

"So that they concluded—" said Madame.

"So that they concluded one ought to love."

"Very good! Did they impose any conditions?"

"That of choosing," said Saint-Aignan; "I ought even to add — it is the dryad who is speaking — that one of the shepherdesses, Amaryllis, I think, was positively opposed to the fact that one had to love, and yet she did not deny that she had let the image of a certain shepherd touch her heart."

"Amyntas or Tyreis?"

"Amyntas, Madame," said Saint-Aignan, modestly. "But immediately Galatea, the gentle Galatea with the pure eyes, replied that neither Amyntas, nor Alpheisibœus, nor Tityrus, nor any of the handsome shepherds of the country, could be compared to Tyreis; that Tyreis put all men in the shade, even as the oak is superior in majesty to all other trees, as the lily to all other flowers. She gave such a description of Tyreis that Tyreis, who was listening, was really flattered in spite of his greatness. Thus in the same way Tyreis and Amyntas were honored by Amaryllis and Galatea."

"Thus the secret of two hearts was revealed in the darkness of the night, in the shade of the woods. That, Madame, is what the dryad told me, she who knows everything that takes place in the hollows of the oaks and in the grassy dells; she knows the love affairs of the birds and what meaning to give their songs; she understands the language of the wind among the branches, and the hum of the golden and emerald-hued insects in the corollas of the wild flowers; she told it to me, and I repeat it."

"And now you have finished, have you not, M. de Saint-Aignan?" said Madame, with a smile that made the King tremble.

"Yes, Madame," replied Saint-Aignan, "happy indeed if I have been able to divert your Highness for a short time."

"Too short a time," replied the princess, "for you have repeated perfectly all that you knew; but, my dear M. de Saint-Aignan, you were unfortunate enough to be informed only by one dryad, were you not?"

"Yes, Madame, only by one, I admit."

"The result is that you passed by a little naiad, who looked as if she knew nothing, yet who knew more than your dryad, my dear count."

"A naiad?" asked several, beginning to wonder if the story were to have a sequel.

"Yes; beside the oak of which you spoke, and which is called the royal oak — at least, I think such is its name, is it not, M. de Saint-Aignan — ?"

Saint-Aignan and the King exchanged glances.

"Yes, Madame," replied the former.

"Well, there is a pretty little stream which runs over pebbles in the midst of forget-me-nots and daffodils."

"I think that you are right," said the King, still anxious and listening attentively to his sister-in-law's every word.

"Oh, there is one, I am sure of it," said Madame, "and the proof of it is that the naiad who reigns over this stream stopped me in the path."

"Indeed!" said Saint-Aignan.

"Yes," continued the princess, "and in order to tell me many things which M. de Saint-Aignan did not put in his tale —"

"Oh, tell the story yourself," said Monsieur, "you do it so well."

The princess bowed at the compliment from her husband.

"I have not the poetry of the count or his talent for bringing out every detail."

"But you will be heard with none the less interest," said the King, who felt in advance something hostile in his sister-in-law's story.

"I will speak, then," continued Madame, "in the name of that poor little naiad who is by far the most charming demi-goddess I have ever met. Moreover, she laughed so much during the story she told me that in virtue of that medical axiom 'Laughter is contagious,' I beg your permission to laugh a little myself when I recall her words."

The King and Saint-Aignan, who saw many of the faces begin to brighten with that hilarity just suggested by Madame, looked at each other, asking by their eyes if there were not some little conspiracy at the bottom of all this.

But Madame had resolved to twist and turn the knife in the wound. Therefore she continued with her air of innocent candor, the most dangerous of all her artifices.

"So I went that way," she said, "and as I found under my feet many fresh, newly-opened flowers, no doubt Phyllis, Anaryllis, Galatea, and all of your shepherdesses had passed over the path before me."

The King bit his lips. The story was becoming more and more threatening.

"My naiad," continued Madame, "was cooing her little song on the bed of her stream; when I saw that she was attracting my attention by touching the hem of my robe, I could not think of receiving her ungraciously, — since after all a divinity, even though she be of second rank, is always of greater importance than a mortal princess, — so I accosted the naiad, and this is what she told me amid bursts of laughter:

"'Imagine, princess,' — you understand, Sire, that it is the naiad who is speaking?"

The King gave a sign of assent. Madame continued:

"'Imagine, princess, the banks of my stream have just witnessed a most amusing sight. Two inquisitive shepherds, inquisitive to the point of indiscretion, allowed themselves to be mystified in the most delightful manner by three nymphs, or shepherdesses.'

"I beg your pardon, but I do not remember whether she said nymphs or shepherdesses. It does not matter, does it?" so we will continue."

At this preamble the King colored visibly, and Saint-Aignan, completely upset, began to look about anxiously.

"'The two shepherds,' continued my little naiad, still laughing, 'followed the three young ladies.' No, I mean the three nymphs; forgive me, I am mistaken, the three shepherdesses. That is not always wise, for it may trouble those who are followed. I appeal to all these ladies, and not one of them will contradict me, I am sure."

The King, very anxious as to what might follow, assented with a gesture.

"'But,' continued the naiad, 'the shepherdesses had seen Tyrcis and Amyntas enter the wood, and by the help of the moon they had recognized them through the trees.' Ah, you laugh," interrupted Madame, "but wait, you have not yet reached the end."

The King grew pale. Saint-Aignan wiped his forehead, which was damp with perspiration.

Among the groups of women there were some stifled bursts of laughter and furtive whisperings.

"'The shepherdesses, I say, seeing the indiscretion of the two shepherds, seated themselves at the foot of the royal oak, and when they were sure that their indiscreet eavesdroppers were near enough not to lose a word of what they were about to say, they made them in the most innocent manner in the

world a burning declaration of love, which, in the vanity natural to all men, even to the most sentimental shepherds, seemed to the listeners as sweet as honey."

At these words, which the guests could not hear without laughter, there darted from the King's eyes a flash as of lightning. Saint-Aignan dropped his head, and with a bitter burst of laughter gave vent to the rage which he felt.

"Oh," said the King, rising to his full height, "on my word, that is a charming jest, and told by you, Madame, in no less charming a manner. But did you really and truly understand the language of the naiads?"

"But the count pretends that he understood that of the dryads," said Madame, quickly.

"No doubt," said the King, "but you know the count has the weakness to aspire to the academy, so that with this end in view he has learned all sorts of things of which happily you are ignorant; and it might be possible that the language of the Nymph of the Waters might be one of the things which you have not studied."

"You understand, Sire," replied Madame, "that for such facts one does not rely wholly upon one's self. A woman's ear is not infallible, Saint Augustine said; therefore I wished to enlighten myself by other opinions than my own, and since my naiad, who in her character of goddess is polyglot, — that is what it is called, is it not, M. de Saint-Aignan —?"

"Yes, Madame," said the latter, completely overcome.

"And," continued the princess, "since my naiad, who in her character of goddess is polyglot, had first spoken to me in English, I feared, as you say, that I might have misunderstood; so I sent for Mesdemoiselles de Montalais, de Tonnay-Charente, and de la Vallière, begging my naiad to repeat to me in French the story she had already told me in English."

"And did she do so?" asked the King.

"Oh, she is the most obliging goddess in the world. Yes, Sire, she did so, so that there was no further doubt. Mesdemoiselles," said the princess, turning to the left of her army, "did not the naiad speak exactly as I have said? And have I misstated at any point? Phyllis, — pardon, I am mistaken — Mademoiselle Aure de Montalais, is it true?"

"Absolutely, Madame," said Mademoiselle de Montalais distinctly.

"Is it true, Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente?"

"Perfectly!" replied Athenais, in a voice none the less firm though less distinct.

"And you, La Vallière?" asked Madame.

The poor girl felt the passionate look of the King upon her. She dared not contradict, she dared not lie; she bent her head in token of assent. But her head was not raised again, half frozen as she was by a chill more painful than that of death.

This triple evidence crushed the King. Saint-Aignan did not even try to hide his despair, and without knowing what he said stammered out:

"An excellent jest! Well played, shepherdesses!"

"A just punishment for curiosity," said the King, in a harsh voice. "Oh, after the chastisement of Tyreis and Amyntas who would think of trying to find out what goes on in the hearts of shepherdesses? Certainly I should not. And you, gentlemen?"

"Nor I! Nor I!" repeated in chorus the group of courtiers.

Madame was triumphant at the King's anger; she was delighted to think that her story had been or would be the end of it all.

Monsieur, who had laughed at the double tale without understanding any of it, turned to De Guiche:

"Well, count," said he, "you are not speaking. Have you nothing to say? Are you sorry for Tyreis and Amyntas?"

"I pity them from the depths of my soul," replied De Guiche; "for in truth, love is so sweet a fancy that to lose it, fancy though it be, is to lose more than life. If, therefore, these two shepherds thought themselves loved; if, then, because of that they were happy; and if instead of this happiness they have to face not only a deathlike void, but jests at love, which are worse than a hundred thousand deaths — well, I say that Tyreis and Amyntas are the two most unhappy men that I know."

"And you are right, M. de Guiche," said the King, "for death is a high price to pay for a little curiosity."

"That is saying, then, that the story of my naiad has displeased the King?" asked Madame, innocently.

"Nay, Madame, undeceive yourself," said Louis, taking the princess by the hand; "your naiad has pleased me much more

because she was truthful, and because her story, I ought to add, is supported by unimpeachable witnesses."

These words fell on La Vallière with a glance which no one from Socrates to Montaigne could have defined.

The glance and the words were the last straw to the wretched girl, who, leaning against Montalais' shoulder, seemed to have lost consciousness.

The King arose without noticing an incident to which for that matter no one else paid any attention; and contrary to his custom, for usually he remained late at Madame's, he took his leave and returned to his own rooms.

Saint-Aignan followed him as despairing on his departure as he had been joyous on his arrival.

Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente, less sensitive to emotions than La Vallière, was not frightened and did not faint; but Saint-Aignan's last look had not been as majestic as that of the King.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

ROYAL PSYCHOLOGY.

THE King entered his apartments with hurried steps. Perhaps he walked so quickly in order to keep from tottering. He left behind him the trace of a mysterious gloom.

That gayety which every one had noticed on his arrival, and at which every one had rejoiced, had not, perhaps, been understood in its full significance; but his stormy departure, his agitated countenance, every one understood or at least thought he understood.

Madame's levity, her jokes somewhat too pointed for so sensitive a disposition and especially for the King's, the too great resemblance, doubtless, of this King to an ordinary man, such were the reasons to which those present assigned the hurried departure of Louis XIV.

Madame, more clear-sighted in other respects, at first saw nothing in this. It was enough for her that she had inflicted some little wound to the pride of one who, forgetting so soon the engagements he had contracted, seemed with no apparent cause to disdain the noblest and most illustrious conquests.

It was not an unimportant matter for Madame under existing circumstances to let the King see the difference between loving one of high rank and pursuing a fancied love as a youth from the provinces might do.

Realizing the dignity and power of a love for one of noble birth, acknowledging in it a certain etiquette and conventionality, a king did not only not act in a derogatory manner, but even found therein repose, security, mystery, and general respect.

In the debasement of a common love, on the contrary, he would encounter even amongst his humblest subjects irony and sarcasm: he would lose his reputation for infallibility and inviolability. Having descended to the region of petty human miseries, he would be subjected to petty annoyances.

In a word, to make of the royal divinity a simple mortal by ridiculing him where his heart was concerned, or even his face, like the lowest of his subjects, was to strike a terrible blow at the pride of that generous nature. Louis was always influenced more by pride than by love. Madame had wisely calculated her revenge, and, as has been seen, she had carried it out successfully.

However, let no one believe that Madame possessed the terrible passions of the heroines of the Middle Ages, and that she saw things under a sombre aspect. On the contrary, young, gracious, witty, coquettish, loving,—though rather from fancy, imagination, or ambition than from her heart,—Madame inaugurated that epoch of light, fleeting amusements which distinguished the hundred and twenty years between the middle of the seventeenth century and the last quarter of the eighteenth.

Madame saw, therefore, or thought she saw things under their true aspect; she knew that the King, her august brother-in-law, had been the first to laugh at the humble La Vallière, and that according to his custom it was not probable that he would love one at whom he could laugh, even for an instant.

Moreover, was it not a question of pride, that evil demon which plays so important a part in that comedy called the life of a woman? Did not that pride say to her aloud, in a low tone, in a whisper, in every possible tone, that she, a princess, young, beautiful, and rich, could not be compared to the poor La Vallière, as young as she, it is true, but far less beautiful and without wealth? And this would not be surprising on

the part of Madame. The greatest characters, it is known, are those who flatter themselves the most in the comparisons they draw between themselves and others, between others and themselves.

Perhaps it will be asked what Madame hoped to accomplish by this so cleverly planned attack?

Why such a display of forces if it were not a question of completely dislodging the King from a heart wholly new, in which he counted on taking refuge? Had Madame, then, any need to attach so great importance to La Vallière unless she feared her?

No, Madame did not fear La Vallière from the point of view from which a historian who knows everything sees the future, or rather the past. Madame was neither a prophetess nor a sibyl. Madame could not read more than another in that terrible and fatal book of the future, which guards within its secret pages the most serious events.

No, Madame wished purely and simply to punish the King for having played the spy in the most feminine way; she wished to prove clearly to him that if he used that kind of offensive arms she, a woman of intelligence and position, would certainly find in the arsenal of her imagination defensive weapons proof even against the thrusts of a monarch.

Moreover, she wished to show him that in that sort of warfare it was no longer a question of kings, or at least that kings fighting on their own account, like ordinary mortals, may see their crowns fall at the first shock; that if, trusting to his appearance alone, he had hoped to be adored from the very first by every woman of his court, it was a pretension human, to be sure, but absurd and insulting for those who held a high position, and that a lesson taught in season to this too proud and haughty royal personage would be efficacious.

Such indeed were Madame's reflections in regard to the King.

The issue of the event was not touched upon.

Thus it will be seen that she had influenced the minds of her maids of honor, and had prepared in every detail the comedy just played.

The King was completely bewildered by it. Since he had escaped from M. de Mazarin he found himself for the first time treated like a man. Such severity on the part of any of his subjects would have met with resistance. Power comes through struggles.

But to attack women, to be attacked by them, to have been imposed upon by little country girls, come from Blois for that very purpose, was the depths of disgrace for a young king full of the pride inspired both by his personal advantages and his royal power.

There was nothing to be done; neither reproaches nor exile; not even sulks. To sulk would have been to admit that he had been touched, like Hamlet, by a buttonless foil, the sword of ridicule. To sulk with women! What humiliation, especially when the women have jested in revenge!

If, instead of leaving all the responsibility to women, some courtier had been involved in the intrigue, how gladly would Louis XIV. have seized the opportunity to use the Bastille.

But there again the royal wrath was checked by reason. To have an army, prisons, almost divine power, and to use all in the carrying out of a miserable grudge would be unworthy not only of a monarch, but even of a man.

It was a question, therefore, of simply swallowing the affront in silence and of wearing on his countenance the same graciousness, the same urbanity. It was a question of treating Madame as a friend. A friend! Yet why not? Either Madame had been the instigator of the affair or the affair had found her passive. If she had been the instigator it was very bold in her. Yet was it not her natural rôle?

Who had sought her in the sweetest moments of her honeymoon to speak to her the language of love? Who had dared to calculate the chances of breaking a marriage vow, even when that vow involved the nearest relatives? Who, shielded by his royal authority, had said to the young woman, "Fear nothing. Love the King of France, he is above all, and a movement of his sceptred arm will protect you from everything, even from remorse."

So the young woman had obeyed the royal voice, had yielded to the seductive tones, and now that she had made a moral sacrifice of her honor she saw herself repaid for this sacrifice by an infidelity the more humiliating in that it was caused by a woman far inferior to her who had at first believed herself loved.

Had Madame, therefore, been the instigator of the revenge, she would have been right.

If, on the contrary, she had remained passive throughout the affair, what cause had the King to be angry with her? Was

it for her to restrain or could she restrain the chattering of country girls? Was it for her, by an excess of misinterpreted zeal, to check at the risk of intensifying it the impertinence of these three girls?

All these conclusions were like so many actual stings to the King's pride; but when he had carefully gone over in his own mind all the grounds of complaint, Louis XIV. was surprised upon due reflection — that is, after the wound had been dressed — to feel other wounds dull, unendurable, unrevealed.

He dared not confess to himself that this acute pain had its seat in his heart and — in fact, the historian must admit to the readers, as the King admitted to himself — that he had let his heart be gratified by La Vallière's innocent declaration; he had believed in pure love, — a love for Louis the man, a love free from all self-interest, — and his heart, younger and fresher than he had supposed, had opened to that other heart which had just revealed its aspirations.

The most ordinary thing in the complex history of love is the double inoculation of love in two hearts; it is not so much a simultaneous event as it is equal in intensity. Almost always one loves before the other, as almost always one stops loving before the other. So the electric current is established in proportion to the intensity of the passion first kindled. The more Mademoiselle de la Vallière had shown her affection the more the King had responded to it.

And this was just what surprised the King.

For it was clearly demonstrated to him that no sympathetic current had carried away his heart, since this avowal had not been of love, since this avowal was only an insult to the man and to the King, since in short it was — and the word burnt like a hot iron — nothing but a hoax.

This girl, therefore, who strictly speaking had been refused everything, beauty, birth, intelligence, this girl chosen by Madame herself because of her humble position, had not only interested the King, but more, had disdained him, him, a man who, like a sultan of Asia, had but to glance, to extend his hand, to let fall his handkerchief.

And since the previous evening he had been so absorbed with this girl that he had done nothing but think of her, dream of her; since the previous evening his imagination had amused itself by clothing her image with every charm she did not possess. He, in short, whom such important affairs

claimed, whom so many women called, he since the previous evening had consecrated every moment of his life, every throb of his heart to this one dream.

It was indeed too much or too little

The indignation of the King making him forget everything, among others that Saint-Aignan was there, was poured out in the most violent imprecations.

It is true that Saint-Aignan had taken refuge in a corner whence he watched the tempest pass by. His own disappointment seemed to him paltry in comparison with the royal anger. He compared with his own petty pride the great pride of the offended King, and knowing the hearts of kings in general and those of powerful kings in particular, he wondered if this weight of anger, suspended as yet, would not soon descend on him for the very reason that others were guilty and he innocent.

In fact, the King did suddenly stop in his hasty walk, and fixing an angry look on Saint-Aignan exclaimed:

"And you, Saint-Aignan?"

Saint-Aignan made a sign which signified:

"Well, Sire?"

"Yes, you have been as silly as I, have you not?"

"Sire —" stammered Saint-Aignan.

"You let yourself be fooled by that shameful trick!"

"Sire," said Saint-Aignan, who was beginning to tremble in every limb, "do not let your Majesty become angry. Women, you know, are faulty creatures, made for evil; so to expect anything good of them is to ask the impossible."

The King, who had great respect for himself and who was beginning to acquire that power over his emotions which he preserved all his life, felt that he was doing himself an injustice by showing so much animosity about so trifling a matter.

"No," said he, hastily, "no, you are mistaken, Saint-Aignan, I am not angry; I only wonder that we could have been duped with so much cleverness and audacity by those two young girls. I wonder, especially, that although we might have informed ourselves on the subject, we were foolish enough to trust to our own hearts."

"The heart, Sire, is an organ which it is absolutely necessary to confine to its physical functions, and which it is necessary to deprive of all other functions. I confess that, so far

as I am concerned, when I saw your Majesty's heart so taken up with this little —"

"Taken up! I! My heart taken up! My mind, perhaps; but as for my heart it was —"

Louis again perceived that in order to conceal one wound he was about to reveal another.

"Besides," he added, "I have nothing with which to reproach the girl. I knew very well that she was in love with some one else."

"The Vicomte de Bragelonne, yes; I had told your Majesty of it."

"Yes, but you were not the first. The Comte de la Fère had asked the hand of Mademoiselle de la Vallière for his son. Well, on his return from England they shall be married, since they love each other."

"I recognize in that all your Majesty's generosity."

"So, Saint-Aignan, we will not think any longer of this."

"Yes, we will swallow the affront, Sire," replied the courtier, with resignation.

"Moreover, it will be an easy thing," said the King, repressing a sigh.

"And in order to begin, I —" said Saint-Aignan.

"Well?"

"Well, I shall make some good epigram about the two. I will call it 'The Naiad and Dryad.' That will please Madame."

"Do so, Saint-Aignan, do so," murmured the King. "You shall read me your verses, they will amuse me. Ah, never mind, never mind, Saint-Aignan," added the King, like a man breathing with difficulty. "To bear the blow with dignity requires superhuman strength."

As the King finished speaking and assumed an air of most angelic patience a servant knocked upon the door.

Saint-Aignan drew back respectfully.

"Enter," said the King.

A lackey partly opened the door.

"What is it?" demanded Louis.

The man held out a three-cornered note.

"For your Majesty," said he.

"From whom?"

"I do not know. It was given me by one of the officers on duty."

The King made a gesture; the valet handed him the note. Louis drew nearer the candles, opened the note, read the signature, and uttered a cry.

Saint-Aignan was respectful enough not to have been looking, but nevertheless he had seen and heard. He now ran forward. The King with another gesture dismissed the valet.

"Heavens!" said the King, as he read the note.

"Is your Majesty ill?" asked Saint-Aignan, extending his arms.

"No, no, Saint-Aignan. Read," and he handed him the note.

Saint-Aignan looked at the signature.

"La Vallière!" he exclaimed. "Oh, Sire!"

"Read! Read!"

And Saint-Aignan read.

"Sire: Forgive my importunity. Forgive also the lack of formality which may be in this letter. A note seems to me more speedy and more urgent than a message. I venture, therefore, to send a note to your Majesty. I have returned to my rooms, overcome with grief and fatigue, Sire, and I implore your Majesty the favor of an audience in which I may be able to tell my King the truth."

"Signed:

LOUISE DE LA VALLIÈRE."

"Well," said the King, taking the letter from the hands of Saint-Aignan, who was completely overcome by what he had just read.

"Well?" repeated Saint-Aignan.

"What do you think of it?"

"I scarcely know."

"But give me an idea."

"Sire, the girl must have heard the roar of the thunder and is frightened."

"Frightened at what?" asked Louis, with dignity.

"Why, Sire, your Majesty has a thousand causes for anger at the author or authors of such a malicious joke. And your Majesty's memory if aroused disagreeably might be an eternal menace to the imprudent girl."

"Saint-Aignan, I do not think as you do."

"The King should see more clearly than I."

"Well, I see in these lines grief and constraint, and now that I recall certain details of the scene which took place this evening at Madame's —"

The King stopped, leaving his sentence unfinished.

"Well," said Saint-Aignan, "your Majesty will grant an audience. Nothing is clearer than that."

"I shall do better, Saint Aignan."

"What, Sire?"

"Take your cloak."

"But, Sire —"

"Do you know the room of Madame's maids of honor?"

"Certainly."

"Do you know how to gain admittance?"

"So far as that is concerned I do not."

"But you must know some one there —"

"Really, your Majesty is the source of every good idea."

"You do know some one?"

"Yes."

"Whom do you know? Come."

"I know a certain gentleman who is on very good terms with a certain lady."

"A maid of honor?"

"Yes, Sire."

"Tonnay-Charente?" asked Louis, laughing.

"No, unfortunately; Montalais."

"What is his name?"

"Malicorne."

"Good. And can you rely on him?"

"I think so, Sire. He must have a key of some sort. And if he has one, since I have done him a service, he will lend it to me."

"Excellent. Let us go."

"I am at your Majesty's orders."

The King threw his own cloak over Saint-Aignan's shoulders and asked for his in return. Then both stepped into the vestibule.

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THE VICOMTE DE BRAGELONNE.

PART IV.

CHAPTER XL.

WHAT NEITHER NAIAD NOR DRYAD FORESAW.

SAINT-AIGNAN stopped at the foot of the stairway which led to the entresol, where were the rooms of the maids of honor, and to the first floor, where were M. de Bragelonne's apartments.

Then, through a valet who was passing, he sent for Malicorne, who was still with Monsieur. At the end of ten minutes Malicorne arrived with head erect, trying in the darkness to discover what was on hand. The King stepped back into the darkest part of the vestibule.

Saint-Aignan, on the contrary, advanced.

But at the first words, indicating his wish, Malicorne suddenly drew back.

"Oh! oh!" said he, "you ask for admission into the rooms of the maids of honor?"

"Yes."

"You know that I cannot do such a thing without knowing your object."

"Unfortunately, my dear M. Malicorne, it is impossible for me to give any explanation; you will have to trust me as a friend who yesterday got you out of difficulty and who to-day begs you to help him out of one."

"But I told you what I wanted, monsieur, which was that I did not wish to sleep out in the open air, and any honest man might express such a desire; while you admit nothing."

"Believe me, my dear M. Malicorne," insisted Saint-Aignan, "that if it were possible for me to explain I should certainly do so."

"In that case, my dear monsieur, I cannot allow you to enter Mademoiselle de Montalais's apartment."

"Why?"

"You ought to know better than any one else, since you caught me on the wall paying attention to Mademoiselle de Montalais; it would therefore be kind in me under such circumstances, you will admit, to open the door of her room to you."

"Who told you that it was on her account that I asked you for the key?"

"On whose, then?"

"She does not room alone, it seems to me; does she?"

"No, certainly not."

"She rooms with Mademoiselle de la Vallière?"

"Yes; but as a matter of fact, you have no more to do with Mademoiselle de la Vallière than with Mademoiselle de Montalais. There are only two men to whom I would give this key: one is M. de Bragelonne, if he asked me for it; the other is the King, if he ordered me to do so."

"Well, give me the key, then, monsieur, I command you," said the King, stepping out from the darkness and partly opening his cloak. "Mademoiselle de Montalais shall come down to you while we go upstairs to Mademoiselle de la Vallière; for as a matter of fact she is the only one we wish to see."

"The King!" exclaimed Malicorne, bowing to the ground.

"Yes, the King," said Louis, smiling, "the King, who is as pleased with your resistance as with your capitulation. Rise, monsieur, and render us the service we ask of you."

"Sire, at your orders," said Malicorne, ascending the stairs.

"Get Mademoiselle de Montalais to come down," said the King, "and say nothing to her of my visit."

Malicorne bowed in token of obedience, and went on up the stairs.

But after a hasty reflection the King followed him, and with such rapidity that although Malicorne was already some distance ahead Louis reached the room at the same moment.

He then saw through the door, which Malicorne had left half open behind him, La Vallière, leaning back in an armchair, and in the other corner Montalais, who in a dressing-gown was standing before a long mirror combing her hair and talking to Malicorne.

The King hurriedly opened the door and entered.

Montalais gave a cry at the noise made by the door, and, recognizing the King, fled.

At sight of Louis, La Vallière rose like a dead person who had been galvanized, and then fell back in her chair.

The King advanced slowly.

"You wish for an audience, mademoiselle," said he, coldly; "I am ready to hear you. Speak."

Faithful to his character of being deaf, blind, and dumb, Saint-Aignan had stationed himself in a corner near the door upon a stool which he chanced to find at hand.

Screened by the tapestry which served as a curtain, and leaning against the wall, he could hear without being seen; so he resigned himself to the post of a good watch-dog which waits and watches without troubling the master.

La Vallière, terrified at sight of the angry King, rose a second time, and assuming a posture, humble and supplicating, stammered out:

"Sire, forgive me."

"Why, mademoiselle, for what do you want me to forgive you?" asked Louis XIV.

"Sire, I have committed a great fault; more than that, a great crime."

"You?"

"Sire, I have offended your Majesty."

"Not in the least," replied Louis XIV.

"Sire, I entreat you not to maintain towards me this terrible sternness, which reveals your Majesty's just anger. I know I have offended you, Sire; but I must explain to you that I have not willingly done so."

"In the first place, mademoiselle, how could you have offended me? I do not see. Is it by a young girl's innocent jest? You made fun of a credulous young man; that was very natural. Any other woman in your place would have done the same."

"Oh, your Majesty overwhelms me by your words."

"Why so?"

"Because if I had thought of joking it would not have been innocent."

"Well, mademoiselle," went on the King, "was this all you had to say to me in asking for an audience?"

And the King started as though to withdraw.

Then La Vallière in an abrupt, broken voice, her eyes dried up by the fire of her tears, took a step towards the King, saying:

"Your Majesty heard everything?"

"Everything? What do you mean?"

"Everything I said at the royal oak?"

"I did not lose a single word, mademoiselle."

"And when your Majesty had heard me, you thought I had abused your credulity?"

"Yes, credulity is the very word."

"And did not your Majesty suspect that a poor girl like me might sometimes be forced to submit to the will of others?"

"Pardon, but I shall never understand that she who seemed to express herself so freely under the royal oak could let herself be influenced to such an extent by the will of others."

"Oh! but the threat, Sire."

"The threat! who threatened you? Who dared to threaten you?"

"Those who have the right to do so, Sire."

"I do not recognize any one in my kingdom as having the right to threaten."

"Pardon me, Sire, there are near your Majesty those of sufficiently high position to have, or to think they have, the right to injure a girl who has no future, no fortune, nothing but her reputation."

"How injure her?"

"By making her lose her reputation through a shameful expulsion from court."

"Oh, mademoiselle," said the King, bitterly, "I like those who exculpate themselves without incriminating others."

"Sire!"

"Yes, and it is painful to me, I confess, to see that an easy justification, as yours would have been, is complicated in my presence by a tissue of reproaches and imputations."

"Which you do not believe?" cried La Vallière.

The King remained silent.

"Oh! tell me!" repeated La Vallière, vehemently.

"I regret to confess it," said the King, bowing coldly.

The young girl gave a deep cry, and clasping her hands, said:

"So you do not believe me?"

The King did not reply.

At his silence La Vallière's features underwent a change.

"And you suppose that I, I," said she, "arranged this

ridiculous, this infamous plot, to amuse myself in such an impudent manner with your Majesty?"

"Eh, gramercy! it is neither ridiculous nor infamous," said the King; "it is not even a plot; it is a jest, more or less amusing, that is all."

"Oh!" murmured the young girl in despair; "the King does not, will not, believe me."

"No, I will not believe you."

"Ah, just Heaven!"

"Listen; what is more natural?" continued Louis, "The King, you reason, follows me, listens to me, watches me; the King wishes perhaps to amuse himself at my expense; let me amuse myself at his, and since the King is a man of feeling, let me attack him through his heart."

La Vallière hid her face in her hands to stifle a sob. The King continued pitilessly, thus avenging himself on the poor victim for all he had suffered:

"Let us then invent the story that I love him and prefer him to others. The King is so innocent and so vain that he will believe me, and then we will go and tell about this innocence of his, and laugh at it."

"Oh!" cried La Vallière; "it is frightful of you to think that!"

"And," went on the King, "that is not all; if this vain prince takes the joke seriously, if he has the imprudence to show publicly something like pleasure, well, before the whole court the King shall be humiliated; moreover, some day it will be a charming tale to tell my lover, a part of the dowry for my husband, this adventure of a King deceived by a mischievous girl!"

"Sire!" exclaimed La Vallière, bewildered, wild, "not another word, I beseech you. Do you not see you are killing me?"

"Oh, a jest," murmured the King, who, however, was beginning to be moved.

La Vallière fell on her knees, and so violently that the sound as they touched the floor could be heard. Then clasping her hands:

"Sire," said she, "I prefer shame to treason."

"What are you doing?" demanded the King, without, however, making any attempt to raise the young girl.

"Sire, when I shall have sacrificed my honor and my reason you will perhaps believe in my loyalty. The story told you at

Madame's and by Madame is a lie; what I said under the great oak —"

"Well."

"That only is the truth."

"Mademoiselle!" exclaimed the King.

"Sire," cried La Vallière, hurried on by the violence of her emotions, "Sire, were I to die of shame on this very spot on which I am kneeling, I would repeat it till my breath failed me; I said that I loved you — well, I do love you!"

"You?"

"I have loved you, Sire, from the day I first saw you; from the moment when at Blois, where I was pining away, your royal glance full of light and life fell on me. I love you, Sire! It is a crime of high treason, I know, for a poor girl like me to love her King and to tell him so. Punish me for my audacity, despise me for my impudence; but never say, never think that I jested about you or that I betrayed you. I am of a race that is faithful to royalty, Sire, and I love — I love my King. Oh, I am going to die!"

And suddenly, deprived of strength, voice, and breath, the girl fell forward, like the flower to which Virgil alludes, when touched by the scythe of the reaper.

At these words, at this vehement entreaty, the King no longer felt bitterness or doubt; his whole heart expanded at the glowing breath of an affection which spoke in such noble and courageous language.

So when he heard the passionate avowal of this love he grew weak and hid his face in his hands.

But when he felt La Vallière's hands clinging to his, when the warm presence of the young girl filled his blood, he bent forward and passing his arm about La Vallière raised her and pressed her to his heart. But she, lifeless, her head dropping back, seemed no longer to be alive.

The King, frightened, called Saint-Aignan.

The latter, who had carried discretion to the point of remaining motionless in his corner, pretended to wipe away a tear, and hastened forward at the call of the King. He aided Louis in laying the young girl on an armchair, rubbed her hands, and sprinkled her with Hungary water, repeating over and over again:

"Come, mademoiselle, it is all over, the King believes you, the King forgives you. There! there! take care, you will

trouble his Majesty too much, mademoiselle. His Majesty is sensitive and tender-hearted. Ah, the devil, mademoiselle, take care, the King is very pale."

This, in fact, was true.

La Vallière did not move.

"Mademoiselle! mademoiselle! really," continued Saint-Aignan, "come to yourself, I beg of you, I beseech you, it is time; think of one thing, that if the King were to be taken ill I should be obliged to call in his physician. Ah! what a state of things. Mademoiselle, dear mademoiselle, recover, make an effort, quick! quick!"

It would have been difficult to use more persuasive eloquence than did Saint-Aignan; but something more energetic and more active still restored La Vallière to consciousness.

The King was on his knees before her, pressing on the palms of her hands those burning kisses which are to the hands what a kiss on the lips is to the face. La Vallière finally came to herself, opened her eyes slowly, and with a dying look murmured:

"Oh, Sire, has your Majesty pardoned me, then?"

The King did not reply; he was still too agitated.

Saint-Aignan thought he ought to retire again. He had observed the passionate light in his Majesty's eyes.

La Vallière rose.

"And now, Sire," said she, with courage, "now that I have justified myself, at least, I hope, in your Majesty's eyes, grant me leave to retire to a convent. There I shall bless my King all my life, and shall die loving God for having given me one day of happiness."

"No, no," replied the King, "no; you shall live here, blessing God, on the contrary, but loving Louis, who will make your life one of happiness, — Louis, who loves you, Louis, who swears it."

"Oh! Sire! Sire!"

Upon this doubt of La Vallière, the King's kisses became so passionate that Saint-Aignan thought it was his duty to disappear behind the tapestry.

The kisses, however, which at first she did not have the strength to resist, began to burn the young girl.

"Oh, Sire!" she cried; "do not make me repent of having been so loyal, for this would show me that your Majesty still despises me."

"Mademoiselle," said the King suddenly, stepping back with an air full of respect, "I love and honor no one in the world more than you, and no one in my court, I swear to God, shall be so highly regarded as you shall be henceforth. I ask your forgiveness for my outburst of passion, mademoiselle; it came from an access of love; but I can prove to you that I love you still more by respecting you as much as you can desire."

Then bowing before her and taking her by the hand he said to her:

"Mademoiselle, will you do me the honor of accepting the kiss which I press upon your hand?" and the King laid his lips respectfully and lightly on the trembling hand of the young girl.

"Henceforth," added Louis, rising and bending his glance on La Vallière, "henceforth you are under my protection. Do not speak to any one of the wrong I have done you; forgive others for that which they may have attempted. In future you shall be so far above them that instead of inspiring you with fear, they shall not even arouse your pity." And he bowed reverently as if he were leaving a temple. Then calling Saint-Aignan, who approached very humbly:

"Count," said he, "I hope that mademoiselle will be good enough to give some of her friendship to you in return for that which I have vowed to her forever."

Saint-Aignan bent his knee before La Vallière.

"What happiness for me," he murmured, "if mademoiselle would do me such an honor!"

"I will send your companion back to you," said the King. "Farewell, mademoiselle, or rather *au revoir*; do me the favor not to forget me in your prayers."

"Oh, Sire," said La Vallière, "do not fear, you are with God in my heart."

The last words intoxicated the King, who, full of joy, drew Saint-Aignan down the stairs.

Madame had not foreseen this turn of affairs; neither the naiad nor the dryad had spoken of it.

CHAPTER XLI.

THE NEW GENERAL OF THE JESUITS.

WHILE La Vallière and the King were mingling in their first confession all the grief of the past, all the happiness of the present, all the hopes of the future, Fouquet had returned to his apartments, that is, to the rooms which had been assigned him in the château, and was talking with Aramis on the very subjects which the King at that moment was forgetting.

"Tell me," began Fouquet, when he had installed his host in an armchair and seated himself by his side, "tell me, M. d'Herblay, what is our position in regard to Belle-Isle, and whether you have received any news of it?"

"M. le Surintendant," replied Aramis, "everything in that direction is going as we wish; the expenses have been paid, and nothing has transpired of our designs."

"But the garrisons the King wished to place there?"

"I received news this morning that they arrived fifteen days ago."

"How have they been treated?"

"Beautifully."

"But what has become of the former garrison?"

"It was landed at Sarzeau and immediately transferred to Quimper."

"And the new garrison?"

"Is ours by now."

"You are sure of what you say, my dear M. de Vannes?"

"Sure. And moreover you shall see how things have turned out."

"But you must know that of all the garrisoned towns Belle-Isle is the very worst."

"I know that and have acted accordingly. No wandering around, no communication, no women, no gambling. And indeed it is a great pity," added Aramis, with one of those smiles peculiar to him alone, "to see how much young people seek amusement and how, consequently, they incline to the one who pays for the amusements."

"But if they amuse themselves at Belle-Isle?"

"If they amuse themselves through the King they will love

the King ; but if they are bored by the King and amused by M. Fouquet, they will love M. Fouquet."

"And you warned my intendant, so that immediately on their arrival —"

"No ; they were left for eight days to grow bored at their ease ; but at the end of that time they cried out, saying that the former officers amused themselves better. They were told that the old officers had known how to make a friend of M. Fouquet, and that M. Fouquet, knowing they were friends, had from that moment done so much that they had not been bored on his estates. Then they reflected. But immediately the intendant added that without anticipating the orders of M. Fouquet, he knew his master well enough to be aware that every gentleman in the service of the King interested him, and that, although he did not know the newcomers, he would do as much for them as he had done for the others."

"Good ! And I trust the promises had good results." I desire, you know, that no one should ever promise in my name without keeping it."

"There was put at the disposal of the officers our two privateers, and your horses ; the keys of the principal house were given them, so that they might make up hunting-parties and promenades with such ladies as could be found on Belle-Isle, and those they could recruit from the environs who had no fear of sea-sickness."

"And there is a goodly number at Sarzeau and Vannes, is there not, your Eminence ?"

"All along the coast," replied Aramis, calmly.

"Now for the soldiers."

"Everything is relative, you understand ; wine for the soldiers, good living, and good pay."

"Very good, so that —"

"So that we can count on this garrison, which is better than the other."

"The result is that if Providence permits the garrisons to be renewed only every two months the whole army will have been there, so that instead of having only one regiment in our favor we shall have fifty thousand men."

"Yes, I well know," said Fouquet, "that no one is so valuable a friend as yourself, M. d'Herblay. But in all this," he added, laughing, "we forget our friend, Du Vallon. During these three days that I have spent at Saint-Mandé, I admit I have forgotten all about him."

"Oh, but I do not forget him," said Aramis. "Porthos is at Saint-Mandé, greased in all his joints, nourished with food and wines; I have told him he may walk in the small park which you have kept for yourself alone, and he uses it. He is beginning to walk again; he increases his strength by bending down young elms or by splitting old oaks as Milo of Crotona used to do; and since there are no lions in the park it is probable that we shall find him alive. Our Porthos is a brave fellow."

"Yes, but in the meantime he will be bored."

"Oh, never."

"He will ask questions."

"He sees no one."

"But he must be waiting or hoping for something."

"I have inspired him with a hope which we shall realize some morning, and he is living on that."

"What is it?"

"Of being presented to the King."

"Oh, oh! In what capacity?"

"As the engineer of Belle-Isle, of course."

"Is it possible?"

"It is true."

"Certainly. Now, will it not be necessary for him to return to Belle-Isle?"

"Yes. I am even thinking of sending him there as soon as possible. Porthos is very fond of display; he is a man whose weakness is known only to D'Artagnan, Athos, and myself. Porthos never commits himself; he is full of dignity. Before the officers he will seem like a paladin in the time of the crusades. He will make the whole staff drunk without becoming intoxicated himself, and will be an object of admiration and of sympathy for every one. Then if it should happen that we had an order to execute, Porthos is the incarnation of order, and whatever he might wish would always have to be done."

"Send him back, then."

"That is my plan, but only after a few days, for I must tell you one thing."

"What is it?"

"I mistrust D'Artagnan. He is not at Fontainebleau, as you may have noticed, and D'Artagnan is never absent or idle without reason. So now that my affairs are settled, I am going to try to find out what are the affairs in which D'Artagnan is engaged."

"Your own affairs are settled, you say?"

"Yes."

"In that case you must be very happy, and I wish I could say as much."

"I trust you will no longer be anxious."

"Hum!"

"The King received you very well."

"Yes."

"And Colbert leaves you in peace."

"Practically."

"In that case," said Aramis, with that association of ideas in which lay his strength, "in that case we can think of what I told you yesterday about the little girl."

"What little girl?"

"Have you forgotten already?"

"Yes."

"I mean La Vallière."

"Ah, yes."

"It goes against the grain, then, for you to try to win her."

"In one respect."

"What is that?"

"My heart is interested in another direction, and I feel absolutely nothing for this girl."

"Oh," said Aramis, "you are interested, you say?"

"Yes."

"The devil! You must take care."

"Why?"

"Because it would be terrible to have your heart involved when you have such need of your head."

"You are right. So you see at your first call I left everything. But let us return to the girl. What use do you see in my showing interest in her?"

"This: The King, they say, has a fancy for her. At least so the story runs."

"But you, who know everything, do you know otherwise?"

"I know that the King has changed very suddenly; that day before yesterday he was raving over Madame; that only a few days ago Monsieur complained of this to the queen mother; that there were conjugal scenes and maternal reproaches."

"How do you know all that?"

"I do know it."

"Well?"

"Well, since these scenes and reproaches, the King has not addressed a single word or paid the least attention to her royal Highness."

"What next?"

"Then he began to be interested in Mademoiselle de la Vallière, who is one of Madame's maids of honor. Do you know what is called a cloak (*chaperon*) in matters of love?"

"Certainly."

"Well, Mademoiselle de la Vallière is Madame's cloak. Take advantage of this situation. You do not need to be told that. But wounded pride will render the conquest more easy. The girl will know the King's secret and Madame's. You do not know how much an intelligent man can do with a secret."

"But how reach her?"

"You ask me that?" said Aramis.

"Yes, I shall not have the time to show an interest in her."

"She is poor, she is humble. You will create a position for her. Whether as his mistress she subjugates the King or approaches him as his confidant, you will have made a new pupil."

"That is well," said Fouquet. "What shall we do in regard to her?"

"When you have desired a mistress what have you done, M. le Surintendant?"

"I have written to her protesting my devotion; I have offered my services, and I have signed myself Fouquet."

"And no one has resisted?"

"One only," said Fouquet, "and four days ago she yielded like the others."

"Will you take the trouble to write?" said Aramis to Fouquet, handing him a pen.

Fouquet took it.

"Dictate," said he. "My head is so taken up with other matters that I could not write two lines."

"Very well," said Aramis, "go ahead;" and he dictated:

"Mademoiselle: I have seen you and you will not be surprised that I have found you beautiful. But for want of a position worthy of you you can only vegetate at court. The love of an honest man in case you are ambitious might serve as an aid to your intelligence and personal charms. I place my heart at

your feet, but as any devotion, however humble and discreet it might be, might compromise the object of its worship, it is not fitting that a person of your merit should run the risk of being compromised without certainty as to her future. If you deign to answer my love it will prove its gratitude by making you forever free and independent."

Having written this, Fouquet looked at Aramis.

"Sign," said the latter.

"Is that necessary?"

"Your signature at the foot of this letter is worth a million. You forget that, my dear superintendent."

Fouquet signed.

"Now by whom will you send the letter?" asked Aramis.

"By an excellent servant."

"On whom you can depend?"

"He is an old retainer."

"Very well; for that matter we are not playing for heavy stakes."

"Why not? If what you say about the complaisance of the girl towards the King and Madame be true, the King will give her all the money she wants."

"The King has money, then?" asked Aramis.

"The deuce! I suppose so, since he no longer asks me for any."

"Oh, he will ask; rest assured!"

"Moreover, I thought he would speak to me about this fête at Vaux."

"Well?"

"He has never mentioned it."

"He will."

"Oh, you think the King is very cruel, my dear D'Herblay."

"Not he."

"He is young, therefore he is good-natured."

"He is young, therefore he is weak or passionate, and M. Colbert holds his weakness and his passions in his villainous grasp."

"You see well enough that you fear him."

"I do not deny it."

"In that case I am lost."

"Why so?"

"I was strong with the King only through money."

"Well?"

"I am ruined."

"No."

"What do you mean by 'No'? Are you better acquainted with my affairs than I am?"

"Possibly."

"And yet if he asks for this fête?"

"You will give it."

"But the money?"

"Have you ever lacked it?"

"Oh, if you knew at what a cost I procured the latest sum!"

"The next will cost you nothing."

"Who will give it to me?"

"I."

"You will give me six millions?"

"Yes."

"Six millions?"

"Ten, if necessary."

"Really, my dear D'Herblay," said Fouquet. "your confidence frightens me more than the anger of the King."

"Bah!"

"Who are you?"

"You know me, I think."

"I am mistaken. Then what do you want?"

"I want on the throne of France a king devoted to M. Fouquet, and I want M. Fouquet devoted to me."

"Oh!" exclaimed Fouquet, grasping his hand, "as to belonging to you I am yours wholly. But believe me, my dear D'Herblay, you are deceiving yourself."

"How?"

"The King will never be devoted to me."

"I do not think I said he would be."

"Yes, you have just said so."

"I did not say *the* King, I said *a* king."

"Is it not the same thing?"

"On the contrary, they are very different things."

"I do not understand."

"You shall. Suppose that the King were not Louis XIV., but some one else."

"Some one else?"

"Yes, who owed everything to you."

"Impossible."

"Even his throne."

"Oh, you are mad! There is no one but Louis XIV. who could sit on the throne of France. I know of no one, not one."

"But I know of some one."

"Unless it be Monsieur," said Fouquet, looking anxiously at Aramis. "Yet Monsieur —"

"It is not Monsieur."

"But how could you expect that a prince not of royal blood, a prince without any claim —?"

"My king, or rather yours, will be everything that is necessary, rest assured."

"Take care, take care, M. d'Herblay! You make me shiver, you make my head swim."

Aramis smiled.

"You shiver and shake for very little," replied he.

"Oh, you frighten me again."

Aramis smiled.

"You smile?" asked Fouquet.

"The day will come when you will smile too; only I must laugh alone for the present."

"Explain yourself."

"When the time comes I shall explain; you need not fear. You are no more Saint Peter than I am Jesus. Yet I shall say to you, 'Oh, man of little faith! Why do you doubt?'"

"Why, forsooth, I doubt because I do not see."

"It is because you are blind, then. I shall not treat you as Saint Peter, but as Saint Paul, and I shall say to you: 'The day will come when your eyes shall be opened.'"

"Oh," said Fouquet, "how gladly would I believe this!"

"You do not believe! you whom ten times I have made cross the abyss in which, alone, you would have been engulfed, you do not believe, who from procureur-general rose to the position of intendant, from the rank of intendant to that of first minister, and who from first minister will pass to that of mayor of the palace! But no," he said, with his eternal smile, "no, no, you cannot see, and consequently you cannot believe that."

And Aramis rose to withdraw.

"A final word," said Fouquet, "you have never spoken to me in this way, never shown yourself so confident, or rather so rash."

"Because in order to speak aloud, the voice must be free."

"Is it, then?"

"Yes."

"Since when?"

"Since yesterday."

"Oh, M. d'Herblay, take care, you push confidence to audacity."

"Because one can be audacious when one is powerful."

"Are you powerful?"

"I have offered you ten millions, I offer them again."

Fouquet rose, deeply agitated.

"Come," said he, "you have spoken of overthrowing kings, of replacing them by others. God forgive me, but that, unless I am mad, is what you said just now."

"You are not mad, and that is just what I said just now."

"Why did you say so?"

"Because one can speak thus of thrones overthrown, and of kings being created, when one is above the kings and thrones — of this world."

"Then you are all-powerful?" cried Fouquet.

"I have told you so, and I repeat it," replied Aramis, with shining eyes and trembling lips. Fouquet threw himself back in his armchair and let his head fall forward in his hands. Aramis watched him an instant as the angel of human destinies might have looked at a simple mortal.

"Adieu," said he to him, "sleep in peace, and send your letter to La Vallière. To-morrow we shall see, shall we not?"

"Yes, to-morrow," said Fouquet, shaking his head like a man returning to himself; "but where shall we see each other?"

"At the King's promenade, if you wish."

"Very well."

And they separated.

CHAPTER XLII.

THE STORM.

THE following day dawned dark and gloomy, and since every one knew that the promenade was down on the programme, every one's gaze, on opening his eyes, was turned towards the sky.

Above the trees hung a thick, heavy vapor, with scarcely sufficient strength to rise thirty feet above the earth, under the rays of a sun which could scarcely be seen through the veil of dense mist.

No dew had fallen that morning. The grass was dry, the flowers withered, the birds sang with more reserve than usual in the foliage, which was as motionless as if it were dead. The strange, confused murmurs, full of life, which seem born and to exist through the sun, that respiration of nature which speaks incessantly in the midst of all other sounds, was not heard; the silence had never been so great.

This gloom of the sky struck the gaze of the King when on rising he went to the window.

But since all the orders had been given for the promenade, since all preparations had been made, and since, what was much more to the point, Louis counted on this promenade to satisfy the cravings of his imagination, and we may even say the needs of his heart, the King decided without hesitation that the appearance of the sky had nothing to do with the matter; that the promenade had been decided on, and that, whatever the weather, the promenade should take place. Moreover, there are certain terrestrial sovereigns privileged by heaven with hours in which one would suppose that the will of the terrestrial king has its influence over the divine will. Augustus had Virgil to say of him: "*Nocte placet tota redeunt spectacula mâne.*" Louis XIV. had Boileau, who ought to have said very differently, and God ought to have been almost as complaisant to him as Jupiter had been to Augustus.

Louis attended mass as usual, but it must be confessed he was somewhat distracted from the presence of the Creator by the remembrance of the creature. He occupied himself during the service in calculating more than once the number of minutes, then of seconds, which separated him from the

happy moment when the promenade was to begin, that is, the moment when Madame was to set out with her maids of honor.

Besides, it goes without saying that every one at the château was ignorant of the interview which had taken place the evening before between La Vallière and the King. Montalais, perhaps, with her usual chattering, might have spread it abroad, but Montalais on this occasion was curbed by Malicorne, who had placed on her lips the padlock of mutual interest. As for Louis XIV., he was so happy that he had forgiven or almost forgiven Madame for her little wickedness of the evening before. In fact, he had more to be glad of than to complain about; without that malice he would not have received the letter from La Vallière; without this letter he would have had no interview, and without the interview he would have remained undecided. There was too much gladness in his heart for any bitterness to remain there, for the time being at least.

So, instead of frowning on seeing his sister-in-law, Louis resolved to show her still more friendship and graciousness than usual.

However, it was on one condition -- that she be ready early. Such was what Louis was thinking about during mass and which made him, during the service, forget things of which he should have been thinking in his character of very Christian King and eldest son of the Church.

However, God is so lenient towards the errors of our youth -- all love, even guilty love, so readily finds pardon in His paternal eyes -- that on leaving mass Louis raised his eyes to the sky and saw through the break in a cloud a corner of that azure carpet which rolls at the feet of the Deity.

Louis returned to the château, and since the promenade was fixed for noonday, and it was only ten o'clock, he set to work desperately with Colbert and Lyonne.

But even while he worked, Louis went from the table to the window, inasmuch as this window looked out upon Madame's pavilion. He could see in the court-yard M. Fouquet, to whom the courtiers, since his favor of the preceding evening, were paying greater attention than ever; he on his part with an affable and happy manner was coming to pay court to the King.

On seeing Fouquet, Louis instinctively turned towards Colbert, who was smiling and seemingly full of kindness and

mirth. He had been in high spirits ever since one of his secretaries had entered and handed him a portfolio which Colbert had placed unopened in one of his deep pockets.

But since there was always something sinister at the bottom of Colbert's joy, of the two smiles Louis preferred that of Fouquet.

He signed to the superintendent to come up, then turning to Lyonne and Colbert he said, "Finish this work; leave it on my desk and I will read it at my leisure."

Then he went out.

At the sign from the King, Fouquet hastened to ascend. As for Aramis, who was with the superintendent, he gravely withdrew to the group of courtiers, among whom he was lost without even having been noticed by the King.

The King and Fouquet met at the head of the staircase.

"Sire," said Fouquet, seeing that the King was about to accord him so gracious a greeting, "Sire, for several days your Majesty has overwhelmed me. It is not a young king, but a young god who reigns our France—the god of pleasure, of happiness, and of love."

The King flushed. Although flattering, the compliment was somewhat pointed.

The King led Fouquet into a small room which separated his study from his sleeping apartment.

"Do you know why I have summoned you?" said the King, sitting on the window-sill in such a way as to lose nothing of what was going on in the gardens, upon which the second entrance of Madame's pavilion looked out.

"No, Sire, but it is for something pleasant, I am sure, after your Majesty's gracious smile."

"Ah, you are a prophet."

"No, Sire; I look, I see."

"You are mistaken, then."

"I, Sire?"

"For I summoned you, on the contrary, to pick a quarrel with you."

"With me, Sire?"

"Yes, and a serious one."

"Really, your Majesty frightens me; yet I am waiting, full of confidence in your justice and goodness."

"They tell me, M. Fouquet, that you are preparing a great fête at Vaux."

Fouquet smiled as a sick man might at the first shiver of a fever returning after he had thought himself free from it.

"And you do not invite me," continued the King.

"Sire," replied Fouquet, "I have not even given a thought to this fête, and it was only last evening that one of *my friends*" (Fouquet lingered over these words) "was kind enough to remind me of it."

"But I saw you last evening, and you said nothing of it, M. Fouquet."

"Sire, how could I hope that your Majesty would descend from the high regions in which you live to such a level, in order to honor my home with your royal presence?"

"Pardon me, M. Fouquet, you did not speak to me of your fête."

"I did not speak to your Majesty of this fête in the first place, as I said, because nothing had been decided in regard to it; in the second place, because I feared a refusal."

"And you had some reason for fearing such a refusal, M. Fouquet? Take care, I have decided to push you to the wall."

"Sire, the great desire that I had to see the King accept my invitation —"

"Well, M. Fouquet, nothing is easier, I see, than for us to come to an understanding. You wish to invite me to your fête; I wish to go to it. Invite me and I will go."

"What! your Majesty will deign to accept?" murmured the superintendent.

"Really, monsieur," said the King, laughing, "I think I am doing more than accept; I think I am inviting myself."

"Your Majesty overwhelms me with honor and delight," cried Fouquet. "But I shall be obliged to repeat what M. de la Vieuville said to your ancestor, Henri IV., '*Domine, non sum dignus.*'"

"My answer to that, M. Fouquet, is — I will go whether I am invited or not."

"Oh, thank you, thank you, my King," said Fouquet, raising his head at this favor, which nevertheless he thought would be his ruin. "But how did your Majesty hear of it?"

"Through public rumor, M. Fouquet, which tells such wonders of you and the miracles of your house. Will it make you proud, M. Fouquet, that the King is jealous of you?"

"It would make me the happiest man in the world, Sire. For the day on which your Majesty became jealous of Vaux, I should have something worthy of your acceptance."

"Well, M. Fouquet, prepare your fête and open wide the doors of your house."

"And you, Sire, fix the date," said Fouquet.

"One month from to-day."

"Sire, has your Majesty no further wishes?"

"Nothing, M. le Surintendant, except that until then I have you with me as much as possible."

"Sire, I have the honor to be of the party of your Majesty's promenade."

"Very good. I am going out, M. Fouquet, and here are the ladies who are going to the meeting-place."

At these words the King, with all the ardor not only of a young man, but of a young lover, turned from the window to take the gloves and the cane which his valet offered him.

Without was heard the neighing of the horses and the crunching of the wheels on the gravel of the court.

The King descended the stairs. When he appeared on the staircase every one paused. Louis went straight to the young Queen. The queen mother, who was suffering more and more from the malady with which she was afflicted, had not wished to go out.

Maria Teresa went in Madame's carriage and asked the King in which direction he wished to drive.

Louis had just seen La Vallière, who was still pale from the events of the previous evening, get into a carriage with three of her companions, and replied that he had no preference. He would be pleased to be wherever she was.

The Queen then ordered the outriders to proceed towards Apremont. The outriders started.

The King mounted his horse. For some moments he followed the carriage of the Queen and Madame, keeping by their side. The weather had cleared somewhat, but a film of dust, like a thick veil, obscured the sky, and the sun made every atom within the circumference of its rays glisten. The heat was suffocating.

But since the King did not seem to heed the condition of the sky, no one else appeared uneasy, and they drove, according to the Queen's order, towards Apremont.

The band of courtiers was noisy and merry. It was easy to see that each was trying to forget and to make others forget the bitter speeches of the previous evening.

Madame was especially charming.

In fact, Madame saw the King at her side, and since she did not suppose he was there for the sake of the Queen, she hoped that her prince had returned to her.

But at the end of about a quarter of an hour, with a gracious smile, the King bowed and turned back, letting the Queen's carriage go on; then that of the first ladies of honor, and the others, one by one, passed him.

Each, seeing him stop, had wished to do likewise, but Louis signed to them to proceed.

When La Vallière's carriage was passing, the King approached it, bowed to the ladies, and was about to follow them as he had followed Madame, when the line of vehicles suddenly came to a standstill.

No doubt the Queen, anxious because the King had left her, had ordered this manœuvre. It will be remembered that the direction of the drive had been left with her. The King sent to ask what she meant by stopping the carriages. She replied that she wished to walk.

She probably hoped that the King, who was following on horseback the carriage of the maids of honor, would not dare to follow the maids of honor themselves.

They were in the midst of the forest. The pleasure party, in fact, was promising to be a delightful one, particularly for dreamers or lovers.

Three beautiful long paths, shady and undulating, stretched from the little open space in which they had just halted. Down each of these paths, green and mossy, and covered with leaves, about a foot of sky was visible through the interlacing of the trees. Such were the surroundings.

At the end of these alleys passed and repassed, with manifest signs of uneasiness, startled deer, which, after pausing an instant in the middle of the path, raised their heads and darted away like arrows, returning with single bounds to the dense woods, in which they disappeared. From time to time a philosophical rabbit sat erect on its haunches, rubbing its muzzle with its forepaws, sniffing the air to find out whether all these people, who were approaching and who had thus interrupted his meditations, his meals, and his love affairs, were not fol-

lowed by some dog about to spring, or did not carry guns under their arms.

Every one followed the example of the Queen and left the carriages.

Maria Teresa took the arm of one of her maids of honor, and with a side glance at the King, who did not seem to perceive that he was in the slightest degree the object of the Queen's attention, entered the forest by the first path which lay before her. Two outriders preceded her Majesty with canes which they used to turn aside the branches or remove obstacles which might be in the way.

In stepping from her carriage Madame found M. de Guiche, who bowed and placed himself at her disposal.

Delighted with the bath of two days before, Monsieur had declared himself in favor of the river, and while giving leave of absence to De Guiche, had remained at the château with the Chevalier de Lorraine and Manicamp. He no longer felt the slightest jealousy.

They sought in vain for him, therefore, in the party, but since Monsieur was a prince much taken up with himself, and since he usually added little to the general enjoyment, his absence was the subject of satisfaction rather than of regret.

Every one had followed the example of the Queen and Madame, doing as he pleased according to chance or taste.

The King, as we have said, had remained near La Vallière, and dismounting as the door of her carriage was opened had offered her his hand.

At once Montalais and Tonnay-Charente had withdrawn, the former for motives of interest, the latter through discretion, but with this difference between them that the one retired to please the King, the other to incur his displeasure.

During the last half hour the weather, too, had changed. The cloud which had obscured the sky, as though drawn by a hot wind, had concentrated itself in the west, then driven back by a contrary current was advancing slowly, heavily.

The storm was approaching, but the King did not see it, and no one else felt that he could do so.

The walk was, therefore, continued. Some anxious spirits glanced from time to time at the sky. Others still more timid kept close to the carriages, in which they counted on seeking shelter in case of a storm.

But most of the party, seeing the King boldly enter the woods with La Vallière, followed.

Perceiving this, Louis took La Vallière by the hand and led her into a side path where this time no one dared to follow.

CHAPTER XLIII.

THE RAIN.

At this moment, in the very direction which the King and La Vallière had just taken, but in the wood itself, instead of in the path, two men were walking, wholly indifferent to the appearance of the sky. Their heads were bent as though they were in deep thought. They had not seen De Guiche or Madame, the King or La Vallière.

Suddenly something fell through the air like a shot of flame and was followed by a dull, far-off rumble.

"Ah," said one of the two, raising his head, "here's the storm."

"Shall we go back to the carriages, my dear D'Herblay?"

Aramis raised his eyes and looked at the heavens.

"Oh," said he, "there is no hurry as yet."

Then resuming the conversation where it doubtless had been interrupted:

"You say, then, that the letter which we wrote last evening should have reached its destination by now?"

"I say that it certainly has."

"By whom did you send it?"

"By my old retainer, as I had the honor of telling you."

"Did he bring back an answer?"

"I have not seen him since. No doubt the girl was on duty with Madame, who was dressing in her own room, and she made him wait. The hour for starting came and we left, consequently I do not know what took place."

"Did you see the King before leaving?"

"Yes."

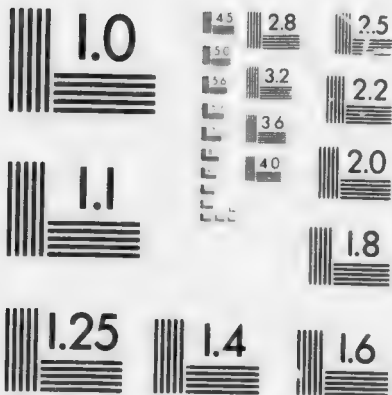
"How did you find him?"

"Perfect or infamous, according as he meant to be sincere or hypocritical."



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"And the fête?"

"Is to take place in a month."

"He invited himself?"

"With an insistence in which I recognized Colbert."

"Good."

"Did not the night dispel your illusions?"

"On what subject?"

"About the aid you could render me under these circumstances?"

"No, I spent the night writing, and all my orders are given."

"The fête will cost several millions. Do not forget that."

"I will supply six; do you raise two or three in any way you can."

"You are a wonderful man, D'Herblay."

Aramis smiled.

"But," asked Fouquet, still with some anxiety, "since you squander millions thus, why a few days ago did you not take from your own pocket the fifty thousand francs for Baise-meaux?"

"Because a few days ago I was as poor as Job."

"And to-day?"

"To-day I am richer than the King."

"Very well," said Fouquet, "I understand now. I know you are incapable of breaking your word. I do not wish to wrest your secret from you, so let us speak no more of it."

At that moment a dull rumble was heard, which suddenly burst into a violent clap of thunder.

"I told you so," said Fouquet.

"Come," said Aramis, "let us go back to the carriages."

"We shall not have time," said Fouquet, "here is the rain."

In short, as if the sky had opened, a downpour of large drops was suddenly heard on the trees above them.

"Oh," said Aramis, "we shall have time to reach the carriages before the rain gets through the leaves."

"We had better take refuge in some grotto," said Fouquet.

"Yes, but where are we to find one?" asked Aramis.

"I know one," said Fouquet, with a smile, "not ten feet from here."

Then, looking around:

"Yes," said he, "that's it."

"How lucky you are to have so good a memory!" said Aramis, smiling in turn. "But are you not afraid that, not seeing us return, your driver will think we have gone back by another way and will follow the court carriages?"

"Oh," said Fouquet, "there is no danger. When I station my driver and carriage in any place, nothing short of an order from the King himself can move them. Besides, it seems to me that we are not the only ones who have come so far. I hear footsteps and the sound of voices."

As he spoke, Fouquet turned, pressing back with his cane a mass of foliage which hid the path.

Aramis glanced at the same moment through the opening.

"A woman!" exclaimed Aramis.

"A man!" cried Fouquet.

"La Vallière!"

"The King!"

"Oh," said Aramis, "does the King, too, know your cavern? That ought not to surprise me, for he seems on very good terms with the nymphs of Fontainebleau."

"Never mind," said Fouquet, "let us go there just the same. If he does not know it we shall see what he will do; if he does know it — it has two openings, and we can leave by one as he enters by the other."

"Is it far?" asked Aramis, "for here comes the rain."

"We are there now."

Fouquet pushed aside some branches and they could see an opening in a rock almost completely hidden by heath, ivy, and a thick growth of shrubs. Fouquet led the way, followed by Aramis. As they were about to enter the grotto, Aramis turned.

"Oh," said he, "there they are entering the wood, and coming in this direction."

"Well, let us give way to them," said Fouquet, smiling and drawing Aramis by his cloak, "but I do not believe the King knows my grotto."

"They are looking around," said Aramis, "but only for a thick tree."

Aramis was not mistaken. The King was looking up and not around him. He was holding La Vallière's arm in his own, her hand in his. She was beginning to slip on the damp grass.

Louis again glanced around him more carefully, and perceiv-

ing an enormous oak with thick foliage he led La Vallière beneath its shelter.

The poor girl looked about her. She seemed both to fear and to wish to be followed.

The King made her lean back against the trunk of the tree, the vast circumference of which, protected by the thick foliage, was as dry as if the rain had not been falling in torrents. He himself stood before her with uncovered head. After a few minutes some drops of rain penetrated between the leaves of the tree and fell on the forehead of the King, who paid no attention to them.

"Oh, Sire," murmured La Vallière, pushing his hat towards him.

But the King bowed and absolutely refused to cover himself.

"Now or never is the time to offer your place," whispered Fouquet into Aramis' ear.

"Now or never is the time to listen, and not to lose a word of what they are about to say," replied Aramis.

Both became silent, and the King's voice reached them.

"Oh, mademoiselle," said the King. "I see, or rather I divine, your anxiety. Pray believe that I sincerely regret having separated you from the rest of the party and brought you to a place where you will suffer from the rain. You are already wet, perhaps you are cold?"

"No, Sire."

"But you are trembling."

"Sire, it is because I fear that they will put an evil interpretation on my absence at a time when the others are all together."

"I should certainly suggest your returning to the carriages, mademoiselle, but look and listen and tell me if it would be possible to go even the shortest distance at present."

In fact the thunder was crashing, and the rain falling in torrents.

"Besides," continued the King, "there will be no possible misinterpretation of your action. Are you not with the King of France, that is, with the first gentleman in the kingdom?"

"Certainly, Sire," replied La Vallière, "and it is indeed a great honor for me. But it is not on my account that I fear misinterpretation."

"On whose, then?"

"On yours, Sire."

"On mine, mademoiselle?" said the King, smiling. "I do not understand."

"Has your Majesty already forgotten what occurred last evening at her royal Highness's?"

"Oh, let us forget that, I beseech you," said the King, "or rather permit me to remember it only in order to thank you again for your letter and —"

"Sire," interrupted La Vallière, "the rain is falling, and your Majesty has nothing on his head."

"I beg of you let us think only of yourself, mademoiselle."

"Oh," said La Vallière, smiling, "I am a country girl, accustomed to wander through the meadows along the Loire, and in the gardens of Blois, whatever the weather. And as to my clothes," she added, looking at her simple muslin dress, "your Majesty sees that there is very little to be hurt."

"As a matter of fact, mademoiselle, I have already noticed more than once that you are almost everything to yourself and nothing to your clothes. You are no coquette, and, in my eyes, that is a great thing."

"Sire, do not make me out better than I am. Say simply, 'You could not be a coquette!'"

"Why?"

"Because," said La Vallière, smiling, "I am not rich."

"You admit, then, that you love beautiful things?" said the King, quickly.

"Sire, I think beautiful only the things that are within my reach: everything that is beyond me —"

"Does not affect you?"

"Is foreign to me because it is forbidden."

"And I, mademoiselle," said the King, "I think that you are not on the footing you should be at my court. The services of your family have not been sufficiently brought to my attention. The fortune of your house was cruelly neglected by my uncle."

"Oh, no, Sire. His royal Highness the Duc d'Orléans was always very kind to M. de Saint-Remy, my stepfather. The services rendered by our house were not great, and it can be said that we have received all that we have deserved. Every one is not fortunate enough to find opportunities to cover himself with glory in the service of his King. I do not doubt but that if occasion had arisen my family would have had the will, as well as the desire, but we were never so fortunate."

"Then, mademoiselle, it is for the kings to correct the lack of opportunity, and I gladly undertake to repair as quickly as possible the blunders of fortune, so far as you are concerned."

"No, Sire!" exclaimed La Vallière, quickly. "You will leave things as they are, if you please."

"What, mademoiselle? You refuse what I wish, what I ought to do for you?"

"Everything that I desired was done for me, Sire, when the honor of being one of Madame's household was accorded me."

"But although you refuse for yourself, at least accept for your family."

"Sire, your generous intentions dazzle and frighten me, for by doing for my house what your kindness prompts, your Majesty would arouse envy and enmity towards us. Leave me, Sire, in my humble position. Let all the sentiments which I can feel still retain the delicacy of disinterestedness."

"Those are beautiful sentiments," said the King.

"True enough!" murmured Aramis in Fouquet's ear, "and he is not accustomed to them."

"But," said Fouquet, "suppose she makes a similar reply to my note?"

"Oh, well," said Aramis, "let us not anticipate, but let us await results."

"And then, dear M. d'Herblay," added the superintendent, scarcely able to understand all the sentiments which La Vallière had just expressed, "it is often a clever calculation to appear disinterested with kings."

"That's just what I was thinking," said Aramis. "Listen."

The King drew near to La Vallière, and since the rain was falling more and more heavily through the leaves, he held his hat over the young girl's head.

She raised her beautiful blue eyes and shook her head with a sigh.

"Oh," said the King, "what sad thought can enter your heart while I make a rampart for it of my own?"

"Sire, I will tell you. I had already touched upon this question, so difficult for a young girl of my age to discuss, when your Majesty imposed silence on me. Sire, your Majesty does not belong to yourself, you are married; every feeling which separates your Majesty from the Queen, in leading your Majesty to think of me, would be a source of deep grief to the Queen."



HE HELD HIS HAT OVER THE YOUNG GIRL'S HEAD.

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The King strove to interrupt the girl, but she continued with a gesture of entreaty.

"The Queen loves your Majesty with a love which can easily be seen; the Queen's eyes follow your Majesty's every step. Having had the good fortune to meet such a husband, she begs Heaven with tears to let her keep him, and she is jealous of the least movement of your heart."

Again the King tried to speak. Again La Vallière dared to stop him.

"Would it not be very wrong," said she, "if, seeing so deep and so generous a love, your Majesty were to give the Queen cause for jealousy? Forgive the word, Sire, — I well know that it is, or rather that it would be, impossible for the greatest Queen in the world to be jealous of a poor girl like me, — but this Queen is a woman, and as such her heart is open to the suspicions which the wicked would suggest. In Heaven's name, Sire, think no more of me, I do not deserve it."

"Oh, mademoiselle!" cried the King, "you do not know that by speaking as you do you change my esteem into admiration."

"Sire, you misinterpret my words; you think me better than I am: you fancy me better than God made me. Have pity on me, Sire, for if I did not know that the King is the most generous man in his kingdom, I should think he were making fun of me."

"Oh, you do not fear such a thing, I am sure!" cried Louis.

"Sire, I shall be forced to think so if you continue to address me in such language."

"In that case I am a very wretched prince," said the King, with a sadness wholly devoid of affectation, "the most wretched prince in Christendom, since I am unable to prove my words to her whom I love best in the world, and who is breaking my heart by her refusal to believe in my love."

"Oh, Sire," said La Vallière, gently pushing away the King, who had drawn still nearer her, "the storm is subsiding and the rain has ceased."

But at the very moment when the poor child, striving against the feelings of her own heart, which was probably in unison with that of the King, uttered these words, the storm undertook to contradict her. A lurid flash of lightning illumined the forest with a fantastic glow and a peal of thunder, like a discharge of artillery, crashed over the heads

of the two young people, as if the top of the oak which sheltered them had attracted the lightning.

The young girl could not restrain a cry of terror.

With one hand the King drew her to his heart, and placed the other on her head as though to protect her from the thunderbolt. There was an instant's silence, while the two, as charming as are all pictures of youth and love, stood motionless. Fouquet and Aramis were watching, themselves as motionless.

"Oh, Sire, Sire," murmured La Vallière, letting her head fall on his shoulder, "do you hear?"

"Yes," said the King, "you see that the storm is not over."

"Sire, it is a warning!"

The King smiled.

"Sire, it is the voice of God, who is threatening us."

"Well," said the King, "I will accept that clap of thunder as a warning, and even as a threat, if in five minutes it is repeated with equal force and violence. Otherwise permit me to think that the storm is a storm and nothing more."

And the King raised his head as though to study the sky.

And as though the sky were an accomplice of Louis during the interval of silence following the crash which had frightened the lovers, not a sound was heard; and when the thunder was again heard it sounded from a distance, as though during those five minutes the storm, put to flight, had travelled ten leagues borne on the wings of the wind.

"Well, Louise," said the King, in a low tone, "do you still threaten me with the celestial anger? And since you wished to look upon the thunder as a presentiment, do you still think it one of evil?"

The girl raised her head. Meanwhile the rain had penetrated the canopy of foliage and was running in streams down the King's face.

"Oh, Sire, Sire," said she, with an accent of irresistible fear which moved the King in the highest degree. "And it is for me that you are bareheaded and exposed to the rain! Yet who am I?"

"You are, as you see," said the King, "the divinity who chases away storms, the goddess who brings back fair weather."

In fact, a ray of sunlight, filtering through the forest, caused the drops of water which were rolling from the leaves and falling from the branches to glisten like so many diamonds.

"Sire," said La Vallière, almost conquered, but making a supreme effort, "for the last time think of the trouble which your Majesty will have to undergo because of me. At this very moment they are looking for you, calling for you; the Queen must be anxious, and Madame — oh, Madame!" cried the young girl, with an intonation of terror.

This had a certain effect on the King, he started and released La Vallière, whom until then he had been clasping to him. Then he went toward the path, looked about, and returned to La Vallière in some anxiety.

"Madame, you say?" said he.

"Yes, Madame; Madame, who is jealous, too," said La Vallière, pointedly.

And her eyes, so timid, so chastely fugitive, dared for a moment to question those of the King.

"But," said Louis, making an effort to recover himself, "it seems to me that Madame has no reason to be jealous of me; no right —"

"Alas!" murmured La Vallière.

"Oh, mademoiselle," said the King, almost reproachfully, "are you one of those who think that a sister has a right to be jealous of her brother?"

"Sire, it is not for me to penetrate your Majesty's secrets."

"Oh, you believe as do the others!" cried the King.

"I think that Madame is jealous, Sire," replied La Vallière, firmly.

"Heavens!" said the King, anxiously, "have you perceived it in her manner towards you? Has she acted in any disagreeable way which you might attribute to jealousy?"

"No, Sire, but I am of so little account."

"Oh, if it were so!" cried Louis, with strange vehemence.

"Sire," interrupted the young girl, "it is no longer raining, and some one is coming, I think." And forgetting all etiquette she seized the King's arm.

"Well, mademoiselle," replied the King, "let them come! Who would dare take exception to my being with Mademoiselle de la Vallière?"

"For pity's sake, Sire! they will think it strange that you are so wet, that you have sacrificed yourself for me."

"I have done only my duty as a gentleman," said Louis, "and woe to him who does less than his by criticising the conduct of his King!"

Just at that minute they saw in the path some hasty and inquiring faces which seemed to be looking for some one, and which, seeing the King and La Vallière, had apparently found those whom they wanted. They were courtiers sent by the Queen and Madame, and they held their hats in their hands as a sign that they had seen his Majesty.

But Louis, great as was the confusion of La Vallière, did not alter his respectful and tender attitude.

Then, when all the courtiers had gathered in the path, when the whole party could see the marked deference he was showing the young girl by standing uncovered before her during the storm, he offered her his arm, led her toward the waiting group, nodded in response to the salutations, and hat still in hand escorted her to her carriage.

As the rain was still falling, a last farewell from the storm which had passed, the other ladies, whom respect had prevented from entering their carriages before the King, stood without hood or cloak in the rain from which the King was protecting, as well as he could with his hat, the humblest of them all.

The Queen and Madame, like the others, watched this exaggerated courtesy on the part of the King. Madame forgot herself so far as to nudge the Queen with her elbow and say :

"Look! Just look!"

The Queen closed her eyes as if dizzy. She covered her face with her hand and stepped into her carriage. Madame followed her.

The King mounted his horse without showing preference to any carriage and returned to Fontainebleau, the reins on his horse's neck, dreamy and absorbed.

When the party had gone, when they had heard the noise of the horses and carriages fading away, when they were satisfied that no one could see them, Aramis and Fouquet left the grotto. In silence they reached the path. Aramis looked not only before and behind him, but into the depths of the woods.

"M. Fouquet," said he, when he was sure that they were alone, "you must get back your letter to La Vallière at any cost."

"That will be easy," said Fouquet, "if my man did not deliver it."

"It must be done in any case, do you understand?"

"Yes. The King loves this girl, does he not?"

"Very much, and what is worse she loves him passionately."

"Which means that we must change our tactics, must we not?"

"Without a doubt. There is no time to be lost. You must see La Vallière, and with no further thought of becoming her lover, which is impossible, you must declare yourself her dearest friend and humblest servant."

"That will I do," replied Fouquet, "and without any objection. The girl seems to me to be good-hearted."

"Or clever," said Aramis, "but in that case all the more reason."

After a moment's silence he added:

"Either I am mistaken or this girl will be the greatest passion of the King's life. Let us return to our carriage and drive back at full speed to the château."

CHAPTER XLIV.

TOBY.

Two hours after the superintendent's carriage had set off by order of Aramis, carrying them both towards Fontainebleau with the swiftness of the clouds which were hastening across the sky before the last breath of the storm, La Vallière, in a simple muslin dressing-gown, was in her own room, eating her supper on a little marble table.

Suddenly the door opened, and a servant announced that M. Fouquet begged to pay his respects to her.

She had him repeat the name twice. The poor girl knew M. Fouquet only by name, and could not imagine what she could have in common with the superintendent of finance.

However, since he might come from the King, and after the foregoing conversation it was possible, she glanced in the mirror, shook out her long curls of hair, and gave orders that he be admitted.

But La Vallière could not help feeling some anxiety. A visit from the superintendent was not an ordinary event in the life of a woman at court. Fouquet, so celebrated for his gen-

erosity, his gallantry, and his tact with women, had received more invitations than he had requested audiences. In many houses the presence of the superintendent had signified fortune; in many a heart it had meant love.

Fouquet entered La Vallière's apartment, respectfully presenting himself with that grace which was the chief characteristic of eminent men of that period, but which to-day is no longer understood even in portraits of that time, in which the painters tried to depict it.

La Vallière acknowledged the ceremonious salutation of Fouquet by a school-girl courtesy, and motioned him to a seat.

But Fouquet bowed, saying:

"I shall not sit down, mademoiselle, until you have forgiven me."

"I?" said La Vallière.

"Yes, you."

"Forgiven what?"

Fouquet fixed his most piercing look on the young girl, and thought he saw on her face nothing but the most innocent astonishment.

"I see, mademoiselle," said he, "that you have as much generosity as intelligence, and I read in your eyes the forgiveness which I solicit. But a pardon from your lips will not suffice, I warn you. I need the forgiveness of your heart and mind."

"Upon my word, monsieur," said La Vallière, "I declare that I do not understand you."

"That is a delicacy on your part which charms me," replied Fouquet, "and I see that you do not wish to make me blush before you."

"Blush? Blush before me? But why should you blush?"

"Can I be mistaken?" said Fouquet. "Can I have been happy enough not to have offended you by my conduct?"

La Vallière shrugged her shoulders.

"Really, monsieur," said she, "you speak in enigmas, and I am too ignorant, apparently, to understand you."

"Very well," said Fouquet, "I shall not insist. Only tell me, I beg of you, that I may count on your entire forgiveness."

"Monsieur," said La Vallière, with some impatience, "I can give you but one answer, and I hope that that will satisfy you. If I knew what wrong you had done me I would forgive it. All the more freely, then, you understand, since I do not know the wrong —"

Fouquet compressed his lips as Aramis might have done.

"Then," said he, "I may hope that notwithstanding what has happened we shall still understand each other, and that you will be kind enough to believe in my respectful friendship."

La Vallière thought that she was beginning to understand.

"Oh," said she to herself, "I should not have thought M. Fouquet so hasty to seek the source of so recent a favor."

Then aloud :

"Your friendship, monsieur?" said she. "You offer me your friendship? But really the honor is mine. You overwhelm me."

"I know, mademoiselle," replied Fouquet, "that the friendship of the master may seem more brilliant and more desirable than that of the servant, but I promise you that the latter will be as devoted, as faithful, and as absolutely disinterested."

La Vallière bowed. There was indeed much conviction and real devotion in the superintendent's voice.

She held out her hand.

"I believe you," said she.

Fouquet quickly took the hand which the young girl had extended.

"Then," said he, "you will find no difficulty, will you, in returning that unfortunate letter?"

"What letter," asked La Vallière.

Fouquet questioned her as he had already done with all the force of his look. The same innocent expression, the same honesty of countenance was there.

"Well, mademoiselle," said he, "after this denial I am forced to admit that your manner is the most delicate in the world, and I should not be an honorable man if I suspected anything in a woman as generous as you."

"Really, M. Fouquet," replied La Vallière, "it is with deep regret that I am forced to repeat that your words convey absolutely no meaning to me."

"But once more, on your honor, have you received no letter from me, mademoiselle?"

"On my honor, no," replied La Vallière, firmly.

"Very well, that is enough; mademoiselle, permit me to renew the assurance of my entire esteem and respect."

Bowing, he retired and returned to Aramis, who was waiting

for him in his rooms, leaving La Vallière wondering if the superintendent had gone mad.

"Well," said Aramis, who was impatiently awaiting him, "are you pleased with the favorite?"

"Enchanted," replied Fouquet, "she is a woman full of intelligence and kindness."

"She is not angry?"

"Far from it. She does not even seem to understand."

"To understand what?"

"That I wrote to her."

"And yet she must have understood in order to give you back your letter, for I presume she did give it back."

"Not at all."

"At least you made sure that she had burned it."

"My dear M. d'Herblay, for one hour I have been playing at cross-purposes and I am beginning to have enough of the game, amusing as it may be. Understand me. The girl pretended not to understand what I was saying to her, she denied having received any letter; and having positively denied it, she could neither give it back to me nor burn it."

"What are you saying?" asked Aramis, anxiously.

"I am saying she declared on her honor that she had received no letter."

"Oh, that is too much! And you did not insist?"

"On the contrary, I insisted to the point of impertinence."

"And she still denied?"

"Yes."

"She did not once contradict herself?"

"Not once."

"But in that case, my dear fellow, you have left your letter with her?"

"I had to."

"Oh, that was a great mistake."

"What the devil would you have done if you had been in my place?"

"You could not compel her, it is true, but it is annoying. Such a letter ought not to be in existence against us."

"The girl is generous."

"If she were really so she would have given you back your letter."

"I tell you she is. I saw her eyes. I can read eyes."

"Then you think she can be relied on?"

"Most assuredly."

"Well, I think that we are making a mistake."

"How so?"

"I think that, as she said, she has not received the letter."

"Not received the letter?"

"No."

"You suppose —"

"I suppose that for some reason of which we are ignorant your man did not deliver the letter."

Fouquet rang a bell.

A servant appeared.

"Send for Toby," said he.

A moment later a man appeared, with restless eyes, thin lips, short arms, and bent back.

Aramis fixed on him a piercing gaze.

"Will you permit me to question him?" asked he.

"Go ahead," said Fouquet.

Aramis started to address the servant, then stopped.

"No," said he, "he would see that we attach too much importance to his reply; question him yourself. I shall pretend to be writing."

Aramis sat down before a table, his back towards the old man, whose every gesture and glance he studied in a mirror opposite.

"Come here, Toby," said Fouquet.

The servant approached with firm steps.

"How did you carry out my commission?" asked Fouquet.

"As usual, my lord," replied the man.

"But tell me."

"I went to the apartment of Mademoiselle de la Vallière, who was at mass, and laid the note on her toilet table. Is not that what you told me to do?"

"Yes. And is that all?"

"Absolutely all, my lord."

"Was no one there?"

"No, no one."

"Did you hide yourself as I told you to do? Did she return?"

"Within ten minutes."

"Could any one have taken the letter?"

"No, for no one went in."

"From without, yes; but from within?"

"From where I was hidden I could see the whole room."

"Listen," said Fouquet, gazing steadily at the servant, "if this letter was taken to the wrong place, tell me, for if any mistake has been made you will pay for it with your head."

Toby gave a start, but at once collected himself.

"My lord," said he, "I placed the letter where I have told you, and I ask for only half an hour in order to prove to you that the letter is in the hands of Mademoiselle de la Vallière, or to bring the letter itself back to you."

Aramis watched the lackey narrowly.

Fouquet readily trusted him; for twenty years this man had served him faithfully.

"Go," said he, "that is well, but bring me the proof you spoke of."

The lackey withdrew.

"Well, what do you think about it?" asked Fouquet of Aramis.

"I think that by some means or other you must get at the truth. I think that the letter did or did not reach La Vallière; if it did, La Vallière must return it to you or give you the satisfaction of burning it in your presence; if it did not, the letter must be brought to light if it costs us a million. Is not this your opinion?"

"Yes; but, my dear bishop, I think that you are exaggerating the situation."

"You are blind, blind!" murmured Aramis.

"La Vallière, whom we assume to be a politician of the highest ability, is simply a coquette, who hopes that I will pay court to her because I have already done so, and who, now that she has received confirmation of the King's love, hopes to hold me by the letter. That is natural."

Aramis shook his head.

"That is not your idea?" asked Fouquet.

"She is no coquette," said the other.

"Let me tell you —"

"Oh, I know coquettes," said Aramis.

"My friend! My friend!"

"I carried on my studies long ago, you mean. But women do not change."

"No, but men do, and you are more suspicious to-day than you once were."

Then beginning to laugh, Fouquet continued:

"Come, if La Vallière wishes to give me a third of her love and the King two-thirds, would you find the conditions satisfactory?"

Aramis rose impatiently.

"La Vallière," said he, "has never loved and will never love any but the King."

"But," said Fouquet, "what would you do?"

"Ask me, rather, what I would have done."

"Well, what would you have done?"

"In the first place I would not have let that man go away."

"Toby?"

"Yes, Toby. He is a traitor."

"Oh!"

"I am sure of it. I would not have let him go until he had told me the truth."

"There is still time."

"How so?"

"Call him back and question him yourself."

"Very good."

"But I assure you that is unnecessary. I have had him for twenty years and he has never given me the least trouble. And yet," added Fouquet, "it would have been an easy thing to do."

"Nevertheless, call him back. It seems to me that I saw him talking this morning with one of M. Colbert's servants."

"Where was that?"

"In front of the stables."

"Bah! All my servants are at swords' points with that fellow's."

"I saw him, I tell you, and his face, which otherwise would have been unknown to me, when he entered just now, struck me disagreeably."

"Why did n't you speak of it while he was here?"

"Because I have but just now remembered."

"Oh, you frighten me," said Fouquet, and he rang the bell.

"Provided that it is not too late," said Aramis.

Fouquet rang a second time.

A servant appeared.

"Toby!" said Fouquet; "send for Toby!"

The man closed the door.

"You give me full authority, do you?"

"Full."

"May I use any means to find out the truth?"

"Yes."

"Even intimidation?"

"I constitute you public prosecutor in my place."

They waited ten minutes, but in vain.

Fouquet, impatient, again rang the bell.

"Toby!" he cried.

"My lord," said the valet, "they are looking for him."

"It cannot take long. I gave him no message."

"I will see, my lord." And the valet closed the door.

Meanwhile Aramis, impatiently but silently, was walking up and down the room.

They waited ten minutes longer.

Fouquet rang loud enough to rouse a whole necropolis.

The valet entered trembling enough to show that he brought bad news.

"My lord is mistaken," said he, before Fouquet could even question him. "My lord must have given a commission to Toby, for he went to the stables and took the best horse, which he saddled himself, my lord."

"Well?"

"And he is gone."

"Gone!" exclaimed Fouquet. "Send after him! Arrest him!"

"There! there!" said Aramis, taking him by the hand, "let us keep calm. The evil is done."

"The evil is done?"

"Yes, I am sure of it. Now let us not awaken suspicion. Let us calculate the result of the blow, and parry it if possible."

"After all," said Fouquet, "no great harm has been done."

"You think not?" said Aramis.

"No. A man may write a love-letter to a woman."

"A man, yes. A subject, no. Especially when the King loves the woman."

"Well, my friend, the King did not love La Vallière a week ago. He did not love her even yesterday, and the letter was written yesterday; I cannot divine the love of the King before it even exists."

"That may be," replied Aramis, "but unfortunately the letter is not dated. That is what especially troubles me. If the letter had only been dated yesterday I would not have a shadow of anxiety for you."

Fouquet shrugged his shoulders.

"Am I then a child?" said he. "And is the King ruler over my brain and my flesh?"

"You are right," replied Aramis; "do not let us attach more importance to things than is necessary; besides — well! if we are threatened we have means of defence."

"Threatened!" said Fouquet. "You do not place this ant's sting in the number of dangers that might threaten my fortune or my life, do you?"

"Well, think of it, M. Fouquet. The sting of an ant could kill a giant if the ant were poisonous."

"But that great power of which you spoke — has it vanished already?"

"I am all-powerful, yes; but I am not immortal."

"It seems to me the most important thing is to find Toby. Do you not agree with me?"

"Oh, you will not find him," said Aramis, "and if he was valuable to you, put on your mourning."

"Well, he's somewhere in the world," said Fouquet.

"You are right; let me act," said Aramis.

CHAPTER XLV.

MADAME'S FOUR CHANCES.

QUEEN ANNE had begged the young Queen to pay her a visit.

For some time, suffering and losing her beauty and her youth with that rapidity which signalizes the decline of women who have struggled much, Anne of Austria, in addition to her physical suffering, had felt with grief that she was no longer of any importance except as a remembrance in the midst of the youthful beauties, wits, and influential powers of her court.

The verdict of her physician as well as that of her mirror grieved her far less than the conduct of the courtiers, who were deserting her as rats in a ship abandon the hold into which, owing to the ravages of decay, the water is about to penetrate.

Anne of Austria was not satisfied with the time given her by her eldest son.

The King, a good son more through affectation than affection, had at first been in the habit of spending an hour in the morn-

ing and one in the evening with his mother ; but since he had undertaken the management of state affairs the morning and evening visits were curtailed to half an hour ; then by degrees the morning visit was given up altogether.

They saw each other at mass ; the evening visit had been replaced by a meeting either at the King's assembly or at Madame's, to which the Queen went obligingly enough out of regard for her two sons.

The result of this was the great influence over the court which Madame had gained, and which made her rooms the real royal meeting-place.

Anne of Austria realized this.

Knowing that she was ill and condemned by suffering to frequent retirement, she was distressed to see that she would have to spend the greater part of her days and evenings solitary, useless, and despondent.

She recalled with terror the isolation in which Cardinal Richelieu had formerly left her, those dreaded and insupportable evenings during which, however, she had had for consolation both youth and beauty, which are always accompanied by hope.

She then formed the project of transporting the court to her own apartments, and of attracting Madame, with her brilliant following, to her gloomy and already sorrowful abode, in which the widow of a King of France, or the mother of a King of France, was reduced to console in her anticipated widowhood the ever-weeping wife of a King of France.

Anne reflected.

She had intrigued a great deal in her life. In the good times past, when her youthful mind nursed projects always successful, she had with her to stimulate her ambition and her love, a friend more eager, more ambitious than herself ; a friend who had loved her, a rare thing at court, and whom petty considerations had removed from her.

But for many years, with the exception of Madame de Motteville and La Molena, her Spanish nurse and confidante, in the character of both compatriot and woman, who could boast of having given the Queen good advice ?

Who, too, among all the youthful heads, could recall for her the past, by which alone she lived ?

Anne of Austria remembered Madame de Chevreuse, in the first place exiled rather by her own wish than by the King's, then dying in exile, the wife of an obscure gentleman.

She asked herself what Madame de Chevreuse would have advised her to do long ago, in a similar case in their common intrigues; and after serious reflection it seemed to her that this woman, clever, experienced, and wise, answered in her ironical tones:

"All these young people are poor and greedy; they need gold and incomes to supply their pleasures. Win them over through their interests."

Anne of Austria adopted this plan.

Her purse was well filled. She had at her disposal a considerable sum amassed for her by Mazarin and kept in a safe place. She possessed the most beautiful jewels in France, particularly pearls which were so large that the King sighed every time he saw them, because in comparison with them the pearls in his crown were as grains of millet.

Anne of Austria had no longer beauty or charms at her disposal; she let it be known that she was rich, and offered as an inducement to those who came to her apartments the winning of gold crowns at cards, or handsome presents made on days when she was in a good humor, or windfalls in the form of annuities wrung from the King by her request. Thus she determined to act in order to maintain her credit.

First she tried her plan with Madame, whose support would be most valuable. Notwithstanding the bold confidence inspired by her wit and beauty, Madame went head-foremost into the net spread before her. By degrees, enriched by gifts and transfers of property, she acquired a taste for these hoped-for bounties.

Anne of Austria used the same method with Monsieur and with the King himself. She instituted lotteries in her apartments.

The day at which this chapter opens there was to be a late supper at the queen mother's, and this princess had put up as stakes in a lottery two beautiful diamond bracelets of exquisite workmanship. The medallions were antique cameos of the greatest value. As a means of revenue the diamonds did not represent a very large sum, but the originality and perfection of the workmanship was such that every one at court not only wished to possess them, but to see them on the arms of the queen; and it was considered a favor to be admitted on the days when she wore them, and to be allowed to admire them while kissing her hands.

The courtiers had even, in regard to this subject, adopted various expressions of gallantry to establish the aphorism that the bracelets would have been priceless had they not been unfortunate enough to come in contact with arms like the queen's.

This compliment had had the honor of being translated into every language of Europe, and more than a thousand verses in Latin and in French had been circulated on the subject.

The day which Anne of Austria had appointed for the lottery was a decisive one. For two days the King had not been in his mother's rooms. After the great affair of the dryads and the naiads Madame had been sulky.

The King was not angry, but an all-powerful distraction raised him above the disputes and the pleasures of the court.

Anne of Austria effected a diversion by announcing that the famous lottery would take place in her rooms on the following evening. With this object in view she saw the young Queen whom, as we have said, she asked to visit her the next morning.

"My daughter," said she, "I bring you good news. The King has said the most tender things about you. He is young and easily drawn away, but so long as you keep near me he will not dare to stay away from you; moreover, he is warmly attached to you. This evening there will be a lottery in my rooms. Will you come?"

"I have been told," said the young Queen, with a sort of timid reproach, "that your Majesty intends to offer as prizes those beautiful bracelets which are so rare that we ought not to let them pass out of the wardrobe of the crown, if only because they have belonged to you."

"My daughter," said Anne of Austria, who read the young Queen's thoughts and wished to console her for not having received the bracelets as a present, "I must attract Madame to my rooms."

"Madame!" said the young Queen, blushing.

"Yes. Would you not rather have with you a rival whom you could watch over and influence than to know that the King was with her, always ready for a flirtation? This lottery is the attraction which I am using for this purpose. Do you blame me?"

"Oh, no," said Maria Teresa, clapping her hands with childish joy, like the little Spaniard that she was.

"And you no longer regret, my dear, do you, that I did not give you these bracelets as I first intended?"

"No, no, my good mother!"

"Well, my dear daughter, make yourself look as beautiful as possible, that our supper may be brilliant. The gayer you are the more charming you will appear, and you will eclipse all the ladies by your brightness as well as by your position."

Maria Teresa left enthusiastic.

An hour afterwards Anne of Austria received Madame in her rooms, and covering her with caresses, said:

"Good news! The King is delighted with my lottery."

"But I am not so delighted," said Madame. "I cannot reconcile myself to seeing such beautiful bracelets on any arms but yours or mine."

"Well, well," said Anne of Austria, hiding with a smile a violent pain she had just felt, "do not rebel, young woman, and do not look at things immediately in their worst light."

"Ah, Madame, fortune is blind, and I am told you have two hundred tickets."

"Quite that number, but you must not forget that there can be only one winner."

"No doubt, but who will it be? Can you tell?" said Madame, in despair.

"You remind me of a dream I had last night. My dreams are good; I sleep so little."

"What was the dream? But you are in pain?"

"No," said the queen, stifling with wonderful self-control the torture of a renewed attack of pain in her breast. "I dreamed that the King won the bracelets."

"The King?"

"You are going to ask me what the King could do with the bracelets, are you not?"

"Yes."

"And you might add that it would be very fortunate if the King did win them, for he would be forced to give them to some one?"

"To give them back to you, for instance?"

"In which case I should immediately give them away. For you do not think," said the queen, laughing, "that I am constrained to put the bracelets into a lottery, do you? It is to give them away without arousing jealousy; but if Chance does

not help me out of my difficulty, well, I shall have to give chance a lesson. I know to whom I should offer them."

These words were accompanied by so expressive a smile that Madame had to reward her by a kiss of thanks.

"But," added Anne of Austria, "do you not know as well as I that the King would not give me back the bracelets if he won them?"

"Then he would give them to the Queen."

"No, for the very same reason that he would not give them to me, for if I wished to give them to the Queen I should have no need of him."

Madame glanced aside at the bracelets, which in their casket sparkled on a table near her.

"How beautiful they are!" said she, sighing. "But here we are forgetting that your Majesty's dream was only a dream."

"I should be very much surprised," said Anne of Austria, "if my dream were to deceive me. That rarely happens."

"In that case you are a prophetess."

"I have already told you, my daughter, that I do not often dream, but the coincidence of my dream in this matter is so strange, it corresponds so well with my ideas!"

"What ideas?"

"That you will get the bracelets."

"Then it will not be the King?"

"Oh," said Anne of Austria, "there is not so great a distance between his Majesty's heart and yours — you, who are his beloved sister. There is not, I say, so great a distance that we can call the dream false. See what good chances you have. Let us count them."

"I will do so."

"In the first place there is the dream. If the King wins he will certainly give you the bracelets."

"I admit that is one."

"If you win them, you have them."

"Naturally. That is admissible, too."

"Finally, if Monsieur wins them!"

"Oh," said Madame, bursting into laughter, "he would give them to the Chevalier de Lorraine."

Anne of Austria began to laugh like her daughter-in-law; that is, so heartily that her pain returned, and made her turn white in the midst of her hilarity.

"What is the matter?" asked Madame, frightened.

"Nothing, nothing; a pain in my side. I have been laughing too much. We were at the fourth chance."

"I do not see that."

"Pardon me. I am not excluded from the winners, and if I win you are sure of them."

"Thank you! Thank you!" cried Madame.

"I hope that you will be the favored one, and that from now on my dream will begin to assume the solid outlines of reality."

"Really, you give me both hope and confidence," said Madame, "and if won in this way the bracelets will be a hundred times more dear to me."

"Till this evening, then."

"Till this evening."

And the princesses separated.

After her daughter-in-law had gone, Anne of Austria said to herself, as she examined the bracelets:

"They are, indeed, precious, since through them this evening I shall win over a heart to me, and, at the same time, fathom a secret."

Then, turning to her deserted alcove, she said, addressing vacancy:

"Is it thus that you would have acted, my poor Chevreuse? It is, is it not?"

And like a perfume from other days, all her youth, all her wild imagination, all her happiness, returned to her with the echo of this invocation.

CHAPTER XLVI.

THE LOTTERY.

THAT evening at eight o'clock every one had assembled in the apartments of the queen mother.

Anne of Austria, in full dress, beautiful with the remains of a great beauty supplemented by every resource which coquetry could put into skilful hands, concealed, or rather strove to conceal, from the throng of young courtiers around her—who still admired her, thanks to the combination of circumstances indicated in the preceding chapter—the ravages already visible of that disease to which a few years later she succumbed.

Madame, almost as much of a coquette as Anne of Austria, and the Queen, simple and natural as always, were seated beside her, each contending for her good graces.

The maids of honor, united in a body in order to resist with greater force and consequently with greater success the lively conversations which the young men were carrying on about them, afforded to one another, like a battalion formed in a square, the mutual aid of a good defence and a good attack.

Montalais, learned in that species of warfare, protected the entire line by the rolling fire which she directed upon the enemy.

Saint-Aignan, in despair at the rigor, which in its severity was almost insulting, of Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente, strove to turn his back upon her, but conquered by the irresistible brilliancy of the beauty's eyes he returned every moment to consecrate his defeat by new submissions, to which Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente did not fail to reply with fresh words of impertinence.

Saint-Aignan did not know to which saint to devote himself.

La Vallière had about her not a court, but the nucleus of one.

Hoping by this manœuvre to attract the eyes of Athenaïs, Saint-Aignan approached the young girl and bowed with a respect which made some slow wits believe that he was weighing Louise against Athenaïs.

But these were persons who had neither seen nor heard the story of the scene in the storm. As the majority was already informed and well informed too on that matter, her acknowledged favor had attracted to her the cleverest as well as the most foolish at court. The former because they said with Montaigne, "What do I know?" The latter because they said with Rabelais, "Perhaps."

The greater number had followed the latter, as in hunting only five or six of the best hounds follow the scent of the animal, while the rest of the pack follow only the scent of the hounds.

Mesdames and the Queen examined the toilets of their ladies and maids of honor as well as those of the other ladies, and deigned to forget that they were queens while remembering that they were women. That is to say, they pitilessly picked to pieces every petticoat, as Molière would have said.

The looks of both princesses fell simultaneously upon La Vallière, who, as we have said, was completely surrounded at that moment. Madame was without mercy.

"Really," said she, leaning towards the queen mother, "if Chance were just she would favor that poor little La Vallière."

"That is not possible," said the queen mother, smiling.

"Why not?"

"There are only two hundred tickets, so that every one cannot be on the list."

"Is she not?"

"No."

"What a pity! She might have won them and sold them."

"Sold them!" exclaimed the Queen.

"Yes; that would have brought her a dowry, and she would not have to marry without a trousseau, as will probably happen."

"Ah, bah! Really? Poor little one!" said the queen mother. "Has she no dresses?" And she uttered the words like a woman who has never known what it is to be without money.

"Why, look! I think, God forgive me! that she is wearing this evening the same skirt she wore this morning on the drive, and which she must have preserved, thanks to the care the King took to shield her from the rain."

Just as Madame spoke the King entered.

The two princesses would not perhaps have seen his arrival, taken up as they were with their gossiping, had not Madame seen La Vallière, who was standing up facing the gallery, suddenly grow confused and say a few words to the courtiers about her, who immediately dispersed. This movement attracted Madame's eyes to the door. At that moment the captain of the guards announced the King.

La Vallière, who until then had had her eyes fixed on the gallery, suddenly dropped them.

The King entered. He was dressed with magnificence and taste, and was conversing with Monsieur and the Duc de Roquelaure. Monsieur was on his right and the Duc de Roquelaure on his left.

The King advanced first to the queens, whom he saluted with graceful respect. He took his mother's hand, kissed it, addressed a few compliments to Madame on the beauty of her costume, and then began to make the rounds of the assembly. La Vallière was saluted like the others; no more, no less. Then his Majesty returned to his mother and his wife.

When the courtiers saw that the King had addressed only an

ordinary remark to the young girl who had been so especially noticed in the morning they immediately drew their own conclusions as to this coldness. The conclusion was that the King had had a fancy, but that it was already over.

However, one thing must be stated — that among the courtiers around La Vallière was M. Fouquet, whose respectful manner served to sustain the young girl in the midst of the various emotions that visibly agitated her.

Moreover, M. Fouquet was about to speak intimately with Mademoiselle de la Vallière when M. Colbert approached and, having bowed to Fouquet with the most formal politeness, seemed to decide to stand near La Vallière for the purpose of entering into conversation with her.

Fouquet at once withdrew.

All these proceedings were devoured by the eyes of Montalais and Malicorne, who exchanged looks on the subject.

De Guiche, standing within the embrasure of a window, saw no one but Madame. Since Madame, however, glanced frequently at La Vallière, the eyes of De Guiche following Madame's were turned from time to time on the young girl.

La Vallière instinctively felt herself sinking beneath the weight of all those glances, some of which were inspired by self-interest, others by envy. To compensate her for her sufferings she had neither a kind word from her companions nor a loving glance from the King. What the young girl was suffering no one could describe.

The queen mother then had the table brought out on which were the lottery tickets, two hundred in number, and begged Madame de Motteville to read the list of names. As a matter of course, the list had been drawn up according to the laws of etiquette; the King's name came first, then the queen mother's, then the Queen's, then Monsieur's, then Madame's, and so on.

Every heart throbbed as the reading continued. There had been more than three hundred invited to the queen's. Each was wondering if his name would be of the privileged number.

The King listened with as much attention as the others. When the last name had been read, he saw that La Vallière's was not on the list. Every one, for that matter, had noticed the omission. The King flushed, as though annoyed.

La Vallière, sweet and submissive, showed no feeling.

During the reading the King had not taken his eyes from her, and the young girl seemed to expand beneath the happy

influence which she felt was spreading around her, too happy and too pure for any other thought besides that of love to enter her mind or heart.

Acknowledging this touching self-denial by his lingering glance, the King showed the girl he loved that he appreciated the extent of its delicacy.

The list finished, the faces of the women who had been omitted or forgotten showed their disappointment.

Malicorne, among the men, was also left out, and his grimace said clearly to Montalais, who was also omitted :

"Cannot we arrange with Chance so that she will not forget us ?" to which the intelligent smile of Mademoiselle Aure replied :

"Why, yes."

The tickets were distributed to each, according to his number.

The King received his first, then the queen mother, then Monsieur, then the Queen, then Madame, and so on.

Then Anne of Austria opened a small Spanish leather bag containing two hundred numbers engraved upon mother of pearl balls, and handed the open bag to the youngest of her maids of honor, that she might draw out a ball.

The expectation of those present, amidst all these slow preparations, was one of cupidity rather than curiosity.

Saint-Aignan leaned towards Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente.

"Since each of us has a number, mademoiselle," said he, "let us unite our two chances. The bracelet is yours if I win; if you win, a single glance from your beautiful eyes is mine."

"No," said Athenaïs, "the bracelet is yours if you win it. Each one for himself."

"You are pitiless," said Saint-Aignan, "and I will punish you by a quatrain :

"Lovely Iris, 'gainst my vows
You rebel too much —"

"Keep still," said Athenaïs, "you will prevent my hearing the lucky number."

"Number one," said the young girl, who had drawn the first ball from the bag.

"The King!" exclaimed the queen mother.

"The King has won," repeated the Queen, joyfully.

"The King! Your dream!" whispered Madame, with delight, into the ear of Anne of Austria.

The King alone did not show any pleasure.

He merely thanked Chance for what she had done for him by bowing slightly to the young girl who had been chosen as a proxy for the goddess.

Then receiving from the hands of Anne of Austria, amid the eager murmurs of the whole assembly, the casket which contained the bracelets, he said:

"Are they really beautiful?"

"Look at them," said Anne of Austria, "and judge for yourself."

The King looked at them.

"Yes, indeed," said he, "admirable medallions! What finish!"

"What finish!" repeated Madame.

Queen Maria Teresa saw at the first glance that the King was not going to offer the bracelets to her; but since he did not seem in the least to think of offering them to Madame, she felt satisfied, or almost so.

The King seated himself.

The most intimate of the courtiers approached, one by one, to admire more closely the medallions, which soon, with the King's permission, were passed from hand to hand. Immediately every one, connoisseurs or otherwise, exclaimed in surprise, and showered congratulations upon the King. There were beauties for every one to admire: the stones for some, the workmanship for others.

The ladies visibly displayed their impatience at seeing such a treasure monopolized by the gentlemen.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen," said the King, whom nothing escaped, "one would almost think that you wore bracelets, as the Sabines used to do. Pass them on to the ladies, who seem to me to have an excuse for understanding such matters better than you do."

These words seemed to Madame to portend a decision she was expecting. Moreover, she drew this happy conclusion from the eyes of the queen mother.

The courtier who was holding them at the moment when the King made this remark hastened in the general excitement to place the bracelets in the hands of Queen Maria Teresa, who,

knowing too well, poor woman, that they were not meant for her, scarcely looked at them and passed them almost at once to Madame.

The latter, and more particularly still Monsieur, gave the bracelets a long, eager look. Then Madame handed them to the next ladies, uttering one word, but in a tone that was equal to a whole sentence, "Magnificent!"

The ladies who had received the bracelets from the hands of Madame took their time in examining them, then passed them on to the right.

Meanwhile the King was talking tranquilly with De Guiche and Fouquet, allowing them to talk rather than giving them any attention. Accustomed to certain phrases, his ear, like that of all men who exercise over others an incontestible superiority, seized from the various conversations going on about him only the indispensable word that requires a reply. His attention was elsewhere; it wandered with his eyes.

Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente was the last of the ladies on the list, and as if she were ranked according to the position given her there, only Montalais and La Vallière followed her.

When the bracelets reached the last two no one was paying any attention to them. The humble hands which for the moment held the jewels deprived them of their value. This, however, did not prevent Montalais from giving a start of pleasure and envious longing at sight of the beautiful stones themselves, even more than at the beautiful workmanship.

It was evident that if she had been called upon to decide between their pecuniary value and their artistic beauty, Montalais would unhesitatingly have preferred the diamonds to the cameos. So it was with great reluctance that she handed them to her companion, La Vallière, who glanced at them almost with indifference.

"Oh, how beautiful, how magnificent they are!" exclaimed Montalais, "and you do not rave over them, Louise! Why, really you are no woman!"

"Yes, I am," replied the young girl, with an adorable accent of melancholy. "But why desire what we cannot have?"

The King, with head bent forward, was listening to what the young girl was saying.

Scarcely had the vibration of her voice reached his ear when he rose radiant, and traversing the entire circle to reach La Vallière, said:

"Mademoiselle, you are mistaken. You are a woman, and every woman has the right to a woman's jewels."

"Oh, Sire," said La Vallière, "your Majesty, then, does not absolutely believe in my modesty?"

"I believe that you have all the virtues, mademoiselle, frankness among them; I entreat you, therefore, to say frankly what you think of these bracelets."

"They are beautiful, Sire, and could be offered only to a queen."

"I am delighted that such is your opinion, mademoiselle; the bracelets are yours, and the King begs you to accept them."

And as, with a movement resembling terror, La Vallière quickly held out the casket to the King, Louis gently pushed back the trembling hand of La Vallière.

A silence of astonishment more gloomy than that of death reigned throughout the room. And yet from where the queens were sitting no one had heard what had been said, or had understood what had been done.

A charitable friend, however, undertook to spread the news.

This was Tonnay-Charente, whom Madame had signed to approach.

"Great Heavens!" exclaimed Tonnay-Charente. "How lucky that La Vallière is! The King has just given her the bracelets."

Madame bit her lips until the blood came.

The young Queen looked first at La Vallière, then at Madame, and began to laugh.

Anne of Austria rested her chin upon her beautiful white hand and remained for a long time absorbed by a suspicion which filled her mind, and by a frightful pain which was gnawing at her heart.

Seeing Madame turn pale, and guessing the cause, De Guiche hurriedly left the room and disappeared.

Malicorne was then able to glide up to Montalais, and under cover of the general outbreak of conversation to say to her:

"Aure, you have near you our fortune and our future."

"Yes," she replied.

And she tenderly embraced La Vallière, whom in her heart she was moved to strangle.

CHAPTER XLVII.

MALAGA.

DURING all this long and violent debate between politics and love, one of our characters, perhaps the one least deserving of neglect, has been very much neglected, very much forgotten, very unhappy.

In fact, D'Artagnan, for we must call him by his name in order to remind our readers of his existence, D'Artagnan had absolutely no place in this brilliant world. Having followed the King for two days at Fontainebleau, and having noticed all the pastoral fancies and hero-comic transformations of his sovereign, the musketeer felt that he needed something more than that to satisfy his life.

Assailed at every instant by people who asked him: "How do you think this coat suits me, M. d'Artagnan?" he would reply to them in his placid, but sarcastic tones:

"Why, I think you are as well dressed as the handsomest ape at the fair of Saint-Laurent."

This was the compliment D'Artagnan would make when he did not wish to make any other, and whether pleased or not, he who received it had to be contented.

When any one asked him:

"M. d'Artagnan, how are you going to dress this evening?" he would answer: "I am going to undress," which made even the ladies laugh.

But after a couple of days spent in this way, the musketeer, seeing that nothing serious was likely to occur, and that the King had completely, or at least appeared to have completely, forgotten Paris, Saint-Mandé, and Belle-Isle; that M. Colbert was occupied with illuminations and fireworks; that for a month more, at least, the ladies had glances to bestow and to receive — D'Artagnan asked the King for leave of absence on matters of private interest.

At the time D'Artagnan made his request the King was about to go to sleep, worn out from dancing.

"You wish to leave me, M. d'Artagnan?" said the King in a tone of surprise.

Louis XIV. could never understand how any one who might have the honor of staying near him could wish to leave.

"Sire," said D'Artagnan, "I leave you because I am of no use to you. If I could only hold the balancing pole while you danced, that would be different."

"But, my dear M. d'Artagnan," replied the King, gravely, "we dance without balancing poles."

"Ah, indeed," said the musketeer, with his almost imperceptible tone of irony, "I had no idea of that."

"You have not seen me dance, then?" said the King.

"Yes, but I thought that dancing always grew harder and harder. I was mistaken. All the more reason for my leaving. Sire, I repeat, you do not need me. And if your Majesty should need me you will know where to find me."

"Very good," said the King, and granted the leave of absence.

We shall not look for D'Artagnan, therefore, at Fontainebleau, for that would be useless; but with our reader's permission we will follow him to the Rue des Lombards at the Pilon d'Or, in the house of our old friend Planchet.

It was eight o'clock in the evening and warm; a single window was open in a room on the entresol.

An odor of spices mingled with another odor less exotic but more penetrating from the street, rose to the nostrils of the musketeer.

Reclining in a great straight-backed chair, with his legs not stretched out, but resting on a stool, D'Artagnan formed the most obtuse angle imaginable.

His eyes, usually so quick and changeable, were fixed, almost closed, and were gazing upon a small corner of blue sky that could be seen through the openings of the chimneys. There was just enough blue to fill one of the sacks of lentils or beans which formed the principal furniture of the ground floor of the shop.

Thus stretched out and sheltered in his place of observation D'Artagnan was no longer a soldier, no longer an officer of the palace, but a citizen in a state of stagnation between dinner and supper and supper and dinner; one of those strong ossified brains which have no room for a single idea, so fiercely does animal matter watch at the gates of intelligence inspecting the contraband trade which might result from the introduction into the brain of a symptom of thought.

We have said that it was night. The shops were being lighted and the windows of the upper apartments closed; the

irregular steps of a patrol of soldiers constituting the night watch could be heard.

D'Artagnan continued to hear nothing, and to see nothing except the corner of blue sky.

A few feet away in the dark, lying upon his stomach upon a sack of Indian corn, was Planchet, with both arms under his chin, watching D'Artagnan as he sat thinking, dreaming, or sleeping with open eyes.

His observation lasted for some time. Finally he ended it by saying :

"Hum!"

D'Artagnan did not stir.

Planchet then saw that it was necessary to resort to more stringent resources; after deep reflection the most ingenious means under the present circumstances that suggested themselves to him was to let himself roll off his sack upon the floor, murmuring against himself the word :

"Imbecile."

But notwithstanding the noise produced by Planchet's fall, D'Artagnan, who in the course of his existence had heard many noises, did not appear to pay the least attention. Moreover, an enormous cart laden with stones going from the Rue Saint-Médéric drowned the sound of Planchet's fall. Yet Planchet thought that in token of tacit approval he saw him smile imperceptibly at the word "imbecile."

This emboldened him to say :

"Are you asleep, M. d'Artagnan?"

"No, Planchet, I am not *even* asleep," replied the musketeer.

"I am in despair," said Planchet, "at having heard you use the word '*even*.'"

"Well, why not? Is not the word a good one, Master Planchet?"

"Yes, M. d'Artagnan."

"Well?"

"Well, the word distresses me."

"Explain why you are distressed, Planchet," said D'Artagnan.

"If you say you do not *even* sleep, it is as if you said you did not have the consolation of sleeping, or, rather, it is as if you said, 'Planchet, I am bored to death.'"

"Planchet, you know that I am never bored to death."

"Except to-day and the day before yesterday."

"Bah!"

"M. d'Artagnan, it is a week since you returned from Fontainebleau; it is a week since you have given orders or drilled your company. You miss the sound of muskets and drums and the confusion of court life; I, who have carried a gun, can understand that."

"Planchet," replied D'Artagnan, "I assure you that I am not in the least bored."

"Then what are you doing lying there as if you were dead?"

"My dear Planchet, there was at the siege of La Rochelle when I was there, when you were there, when we were there together, an Arab renowned for the way in which he adjusted culverins. He was a clever fellow, although of a strange complexion, which was the same as your olives. Well, this Arab when he had entered, eating or working, used to lie down, as I am doing now, and smoke I do not know what kind of magic leaves in a large amber-mouthed tube, and if any officer happening to pass reproached him for always sleeping, he would answer quietly, 'Better to sit down than to stand up; better to lie down than to sit; better to be dead than to lie down.'"

"He was a melancholy Arab, judging both from his complexion and his remarks," said Planchet. "I remember him perfectly. He used to cut off the heads of the Protestants with great glee."

"Exactly; and then he embalmed them if they were worth the trouble."

"Yes; and when he was working at this embalming, with all his herbs and his plants, he looked like a basket-maker making baskets."

"Yes, Planchet, he certainly did."

"I, too, have a memory."

"I do not doubt it; but what do you think of his philosophy?"

"Monsieur, I find it excellent in one sense, but stupid in another."

"Explain, Planchet; explain."

"Well, monsieur; better to be seated than standing is plain enough, especially when one is tired." And Planchet smiled mischievously. "Better to be lying down than sitting, yes.

As for the last proposition, better to be dead than lying down, I consider that absurd, my undoubted preference being for my bed. And if you are not of my opinion it is, as I have had the honor to tell you, because you are bored."

"Planchet, do you know M. la Fontaine?"

"The chemist at the corner of the Rue Saint-Médéric?"

"No; the writer of fables."

"Oh, Maitre Corbeau?"

"Exactly." "Well, I am like his hare."

"He has a hare too, then?"

"He has all sorts of animals."

"Well, what does his hare do?"

"It thinks."

"Ah! ah!"

"Planchet, I am like M. la Fontaine's hare; I am thinking."

"You are thinking?" asked Planchet, anxiously.

"Yes; your house, Planchet, is gloomy enough to drive one to thinking. You will admit that, I hope?"

"Yet, monsieur, we have an outlook on the street."

"Yes, and that's so interesting."

"It is nevertheless true, monsieur, that if you were living at the back of the house you would be bored; I mean you would think still more."

"Faith, I don't know about that, Planchet."

"Still," said the grocer, "if your thoughts are of the kind which led you to the restoration of King Charles II. —"

And Planchet gave a little laugh which was not without meaning.

"Ah, Planchet, my friend," said D'Artagnan, "you are growing ambitious."

"Is there no other king to be restored, M. d'Artagnan? no other Monk to be put into a box?"

"No, my dear Planchet, all the kings are on their thrones, less comfortable, perhaps, than I am on this chair, but on them nevertheless."

And D'Artagnan heaved a sigh.

"M. d'Artagnan," said Planchet, "you are distressing me."

"You are very good, Planchet."

"God forgive me, but I have a suspicion."

"What is it?"

"M. d'Artagnan, you are getting thin."

"Oh," said D'Artagnan, striking his chest, which resounded like an empty cuirass, "that is n't possible, Planchet."

"Ah, you see," said Planchet, with effusion, "that if you were to get thin in my house —"

"Well?"

"Well, I would do something rash."

"Come, now."

"Yes."

"What would you do? Tell me."

"I would find the man who caused your anxiety."

"So I am anxious, am I?"

"Yes, you are."

"No, Planchet, no."

"I tell you, you are, you are anxious, and you are getting thin."

"Are you sure that I am getting thin?"

"Visibly, Malaga! If you keep on getting thin I will take my sword and I will go straight to M. d'Herblay and cut his throat."

"What?" said D'Artagnan, bounding from his chair, "What are you saying, Planchet? and what has M. d'Herblay's name to do with your grocery store?"

"Good; get angry if you will, malign me if you will, but damnation! I know what I know."

During Planchet's second outburst D'Artagnan had placed himself so that he would not lose a single look; that is, he sat with both hands on his knees, his head stretched out towards the worthy grocer.

"Come, explain yourself," said he, "and tell me how you came to utter such a blasphemy. M. d'Herblay, your old master, my friend, a churchman, a musketeer turned bishop, — you would raise your sword against him, Planchet?"

"I would raise my sword against my father if I saw you in your present state."

"M. d'Herblay, a gentleman?"

"His being a gentleman makes no difference to me. He gives you the blue devils, that's all I know. And when one has the blue devils one gets thin. Malaga! I am not willing that M. d'Artagnan should leave my house thinner than when he entered it."

"How does he give me the blue devils? Come, explain yourself."

"You have had the nightmare for three nights."

"I?"

"Yes, you. And in your nightmare you called out several times, 'Aramis! treacherous Aramis!'"

"I said that?" asked D'Artagnan, uneasily.

"Yes, on my honor."

"Well, what if I did? You know the proverb, my friend. 'Dreams go by contraries.'"

"No, for every time you have gone out during the last three days, you have not failed to ask me on your return, 'Have you seen M. d'Herblay?' or 'Have you received any letters for me from M. d'Herblay?'"

"It seems to me very natural that I should take an interest in this dear friend," said D'Artagnan.

"Yes, but not to the point of getting thin about him."

"Planchet, I will get fat. I give you my word of honor."

"Very well, monsieur, I accept it, for I know that when you give your word of honor it is sacred."

"I will not dream of Aramis any more."

"Very good!"

"I will not ask you any more if there are letters from M. d'Herblay."

"Very good!"

"But you must explain one thing to me."

"Speak, monsieur."

"I am a close observer."

"I know that."

"And just now you used a strange oath, which is unusual in you."

"You mean 'Malaga'?"

"Exactly."

"It is the oath I have used ever since I have been a grocer."

"Yes, it is the name of a grape."

"It is my most ferocious oath. When I have once said 'Malaga!' I am no longer a man."

"Still, I never heard you use that oath before."

"No, monsieur, it was given to me."

And as he spoke, Planchet winked with an expression of cunning which roused D'Artagnan's curiosity.

"Well?" said he.

Planchet repeated, "Well?"

"Come, come, M. Planchet!"

"The deuce, monsieur! I am not like you, I don't spend my life in thinking."

"You are wrong."

"I mean in being bored, monsieur. We have but a short time to live. Why not make the most of it?"

"You are an epicurean philosopher, apparently, Planchet."

"Why not? My hand is firm, I write and I weigh my sugar and spices; my foot is sure, I can dance and walk; my stomach has its teeth, I can eat and digest; my heart is not quite hardened. Well, monsieur?"

"Well, what, Planchet?"

"Ah, that's it," said the grocer, rubbing his hands.

D'Artagnan crossed one leg over the other.

"Planchet, my friend," said he, "you unnerve me with surprise."

"Why?"

"Because you are revealing yourself to me in an absolutely new light."

Planchet, highly flattered, continued to rub his hands together so hard that he must have hurt the skin.

"Ah," said he, "because I am only an animal you think that I must be an imbecile."

"Good, Planchet. There is logic in that."

"Follow my thought, monsieur. I said to myself," continued Planchet, "that without pleasure there is no happiness on this earth."

"What you say is very true, Planchet," interrupted D'Artagnan.

"Now let us get, if not pleasure, — for pleasure is no common thing, — consolation at least."

"And you console yourself?"

"Exactly."

"Tell me how."

"I put on a buckler and go and fight the enemy; I calculate my time of endurance, and the eve of the day on which I am about to be bored I amuse myself."

"Is it no more difficult than that?"

"No."

"Did you find it out all alone?"

"All alone."

"That is miraculous."

"What do you think of it?"

"I think that your philosophy is without parallel."

"Well, then, follow my example."

"It is tempting."

"Do as I do."

"I would ask nothing better, but all minds are not of the same stamp, and perhaps if I had to amuse myself as you do I might be horribly bored."

"Bah! Try it first."

"Well, what do you do?"

"Have you noticed that I am sometimes away from home?"

"Yes."

"At any particular time?"

"Periodically."

"That's it. You have noticed it."

"My dear Planchet, you must understand that when people are accustomed to see each other every day, when one is away the other misses him. Do you not miss me when I am in the country?"

"Immensely. I am like a body without a soul."

"That settled, let us proceed."

"When do I go away?"

"The fifteenth and the thirtieth of every month."

"And I remain away?"

"Sometimes two, sometimes three, sometimes four days."

"What do you think I am doing?"

"Looking after your debts."

"And on my return what do you think of my face?"

"That it appears very well satisfied."

"You see you yourself admit that I always look satisfied. To what have you attributed this satisfaction?"

"To the fact that your business is prospering; to the fact that your purchases of rice, prunes, sugar, dried apples, and treacle are selling well. You were always very picturesque in your ideas, Planchet, so I was not at all surprised to find you had chosen the grocery business, which is one of the most varied of trades, and the most pleasant, in that one handles almost all natural and perfumed products."

"Well spoken, monsieur; but how mistaken you are!"

"How so?"

"When you think that I go away every fortnight on matters of receipts and purchases. Oh, monsieur, how the devil could you think such a thing? Oh! Oh! Oh!"

And Planchet began to laugh in a way that inspired D'Artagnan with serious doubts as to his intelligence.

"I confess," said the musketeer, "that I am not able to understand you."

"Monsieur, that is true."

"What do you mean by 'that is true'?"

"It must be true since you say it; but be assured that it in no way lessens my opinion of you"

"Ah, that is fortunate."

"No, you are a man of genius, and whenever it is a question of war, of surprises, of tactics, and of coups-de-main, why, kings are as nothing compared with you. But for repose of soul, care of the body, comforts of life, if one may so speak, ah, monsieur! don't talk to me about men of genius, they are their own executioners."

"Good, Planchet," said D'Artagnan, filled with curiosity, "you interest me intensely."

"You already feel less bored than you did just now, do you not?"

"I was not bored, but since you have been talking to me I have been much more interested."

"Come, now, that's a good beginning. I shall cure you, I am sure."

"I would ask nothing better."

"Do you want me to try?"

"At once."

Very well. Have you any horses here?"

"Yes; ten, twenty, thirty."

"There is no need for so many as that. Two will be enough."

"They are at your disposal, Planchet."

"Good. Then I shall take you away with me."

"When?"

"To-morrow."

"Where?"

"Ah, you ask too much!"

"Yet you will admit the importance of my knowing where I am to be taken?"

"Do you like the country?"

"Only moderately, Planchet."

"Do you like the town?"

"That depends."

"Well; I am going to take you to a place half town, half country."

"Good."

"To a place where you will be amused, I am sure."

"Better still."

"And, wonderful as it may be, from which you have just returned, to be bored here."

"I bored?"

"Yes, mortally."

"Is it to Fontainebleau that you are going, then?"

"Exactly; Fontainebleau."

"You are going to Fontainebleau?"

"Yes."

"And in Heaven's name what are you going to do there?"

Planchet answered D'Artagnan by a mischievous wink.

"You have some property there, you rascal."

"Oh, a wretched little place, — a mere hovel."

"I understand."

"But it is decent, upon my word."

"I am going to Planchet's country seat!" cried D'Artagnan.

"Whenever you like."

"Did we not set to-morrow?"

"To-morrow it shall be. Moreover, to-morrow is the 14th, — that is, the evening before the day on which I am afraid of being bored; so it is settled, then?"

"Yes."

"You will lend me one of your horses?"

"The best."

"No, I prefer the gentlest. I never was a good rider, as you know, and in the grocery business I have become more awkward than ever. Besides —"

"Besides, what?"

"Besides," added Planchet, with another wink, "I do not wish to tire myself."

"Why not?" ventured D'Artagnan.

"Because then I could not amuse myself," replied Planchet.

Thereupon he arose from his sack of corn and stretched himself, making all his bones crack one after the other, in harmony as it were.

"Planchet, Planchet," cried D'Artagnan, "I declare there is not on this earth a sybarite who can be compared with you."

Ah, Planchet, it is easily seen that we have not yet eaten a ton of salt together."

"Why so, monsieur?"

"Because I do not yet know you," said D'Artagnan, "and because as a matter of fact I return to the opinion which I held for an instant one day when at Boulogne you strangled or almost strangled Lubin, M. de Wardes' valet. Planchet, you are a man of resources."

Planchet began to laugh conceitedly, bade the musketeer good-night, and went down to the rear of his shop which he used as a sleeping-room.

D'Artagnan resumed his former position upon his chair, and his forehead, unruffled for an instant, became more pensive than ever. He had already forgotten the whims and dreams of Planchet.

"Yes," said he to himself, taking up the thread of his thought, which had been broken by the agreeable conversation in which the reader has just participated. "Yes, it's all comprised in this: first, to find out what Baisemeaux wanted with Aramis; second, to know why Aramis does not let me hear from him; third, to know where Porthos is. The whole mystery is found in these three. Now," continued D'Artagnan, "since our friends tell us nothing let us resort to our own poor intelligence. We will do what we can. *Mordieux!* or *Malaga!* as Planchet says."

CHAPTER XLVIII.

THE LETTER FROM M. DE BAISEMEAUX.

FAITHFUL to his plan, D'Artagnan went the next morning to pay a visit to M. de Baisemeaux.

It was cleaning-up day at the Bastille; the cannons were being cleaned and polished, the stairways swept; the jailers seemed to be busy rubbing up even the keys.

As for the soldiers of the garrison, they were walking up and down in their court-yards assuming that they were clean enough.

The governor, Baisemeaux, received D'Artagnan most politely; but he acted with so much reserve that all of D'Artagnan's tact failed to get a syllable out of him.

The more he kept himself within bounds the more D'Artagnan's suspicions were aroused. The latter even thought he noticed that the governor was acting by virtue of a recent suggestion. The Baisemeaux of the Palais-Royal had not seemed to D'Artagnan the same cold and impenetrable man as was the Baisemeaux of the Bastille.

When D'Artagnan wished to make Baisemeaux talk about the urgent need for money which had led him to seek Aramis and had made him expansive that evening, Baisemeaux, in spite of everything, pretended that he had some orders to give in the prison and kept D'Artagnan waiting so long for him that our musketeer, sure that he would not get another word out of him, left the Bastille before Baisemeaux returned from his inspection.

But D'Artagnan had a suspicion, and once roused, his mind could not rest. He was among men what the cat is among quadrupeds, the embodiment of restlessness and impatience. A restless cat can no more remain in one place than can a silken thread which is blown about by every breath of air. A cat on the watch is as still as death at its post of observation. Neither hunger nor thirst can draw it from its position.

D'Artagnan, who was burning with impatience, suddenly shook off this feeling as if it were a heavy cloak. He said to himself that the thing they were hiding from him was the very thing it was important for him to know. Consequently he reflected that Baisemeaux would not fail to warn Aramis if Aramis had given him any suggestion, and this is what had happened.

Baisemeaux had scarcely had time to return from the dungeon before D'Artagnan placed himself in ambuscade near the Rue du Petit Muse so that he could see every one who left the Bastille.

After waiting an hour at the *Golden Portcullis*, beneath the roof which afforded a little shade, D'Artagnan saw a soldier leave. Now this was the best indication he could desire. Every jailer or warden has certain days and even hours for leaving the Bastille, since all are forbidden to have either wives or lodgings in the castle, and can leave, therefore, without exciting curiosity.

But a soldier in barracks is kept there for twenty-four hours when on duty, as every one knows, and D'Artagnan knew this

better than any one else. This soldier therefore, could not have left except by an express and urgent order.

The soldier, we were saying, left the Bastille slowly, like a happy mortal who, instead of standing sentry before a tiresome guard-house or climbing a bastion, no less wearisome, has the good luck to get a little liberty in addition to a walk, both pleasures counting as part of his duty. He turned towards the Faubourg Saint-Antoine, enjoying the air and the sun and looking at the women.

D'Artagnan followed him at a distance. He had not yet decided what to do.

"In the first place," he thought, "I must see the fellow's face. A man seen is a man judged."

D'Artagnan hastened his steps and soon outstripped the soldier, no difficult thing to do. He not only saw his face, which was intelligent and resolute, but he saw also his nose, which was somewhat red.

"The fellow loves brandy," said he to himself.

At the same time that he saw the red nose he noticed a white paper in the soldier's belt.

"Good, he has a letter," added D'Artagnan, "but a soldier would be only too happy at being chosen by M. de Baise-meaux as a special messenger, so he would not sell his message."

Meanwhile the soldier was still advancing towards the Faubourg Saint-Antoine.

"He is certainly going to Saint-Mandé," said D'Artagnan, "and I shall not be able to find out what is in the letter —"

It was enough to drive him mad.

"If I were in uniform," said D'Artagnan to himself, "I would have the fellow seized, and his letter with him. The first soldier would help me; but the devil take me if I reveal identity in an affair of this kind. If I were to make him my drink he would distrust me, and then he might drink until I was drunk. *Mordioux!* I have no longer any wits, and I am done for. Suppose I were to attack the wretch, make him unsheath — kill him for his letter! That would be all right if it were a question of a letter from a queen to a lord, or from a cardinal to a queen; but, odds-fish! what wretched intrigues are those of MM. Aramis and Fouquet with M. Colbert! A man's life for that! oh, no, not even ten crowns."

As he philosophized in this way, biting his nails and his

mustaches, he saw a group of archers and a chief of police. They were leading a man of fine appearance, who was struggling with all his might. The archers had torn his clothes and were dragging him on. He begged that they treat him with more consideration, claiming that he was a gentleman and a soldier.

Seeing our soldier in the street, he cried out:

"Soldier, help!"

The soldier walked on at the same pace towards the man who had called him. The crowd followed.

Then an idea came to D'Artagnan. It was his first, and it will be seen that it was not bad.

While the gentleman was telling the soldier that he had just been arrested in a house as a thief, whereas he was only a lover; while the soldier was pitying him, and giving him consolation and advice with the gravity which a French soldier always uses in matters of pride and esprit de corps, D'Artagnan slipped behind the soldier, jostled by the crowd, and quickly and cleverly drew the paper from his belt.

Since at that moment the gentleman with the torn clothes was pulling the soldier about to show how he had been treated by the police, D'Artagnan accomplished his manœuvre without the least inconvenience.

He stationed himself ten feet away behind a pillar of a house and read the address:

"To M. du Vallon, at M. Fouquet's, Saint-Mandé."

"Good!" said he, and he unsealed the envelope without tearing it. Then he drew out the letter, which was folded in four, and which contained only these words:

"DEAR M. DU VALLON: Kindly have M. d'Herblay informed that he has been to the Bastille, and that he has been questioning me.

"Your devoted,

"DE BAISEMEAUX."

"Oh, ho! Very good!" cried D'Artagnan. "This much is perfectly clear: Porthos has a hand in it."

Sure of what he had been trying to find out:

"Mordieux!" thought the musketeer. "There is that poor devil of a soldier whom that furious sneak, De Baisemeaux, will make pay for my fraud. If he returns without the letter,

what will they do to him? Anyway, I have no further need of it. When you have swallowed the egg, of what use is the shell?"

D'Artagnan saw that the police and the archers had satisfied the soldier, and were going on with their prisoner, who was still followed by a crowd of people, to whom he was complaining bitterly. D'Artagnan went into the midst of this crowd and dropped the letter without any one's having noticed him. Then he went quickly away.

The soldier resumed his road towards Saint-Mandé, his mind on the gentleman who had implored his protection. Suddenly he remembered the letter, and, glancing at his belt, saw that it was gone. His frightened cry delighted D'Artagnan. The poor fellow looked all around in a panic, and suddenly, twenty steps behind him, he saw the lucky envelope. He pounced upon it as a falcon on his prey. The envelope, it is true, was a little dusty, and somewhat crumpled, but nevertheless the letter was safe.

D'Artagnan saw that the broken seal worried the soldier a good deal. The worthy fellow ended, however, by accepting the situation and placing the paper back in his belt.

"Go on," said D'Artagnan, "I have time enough now; precede me. It seems that Aramis is not in Paris, since Baisemeaux is writing to Porthos. Dear Porthos! What joy to see him again, and to have a chat with him!" said the Gascon.

And, regulating his pace by the soldier's, he decided to arrive a quarter of an hour after him at M. Fouquet's.

CHAPTER XLIX.

IN WHICH THE READER WILL BE GRATIFIED TO SEE THAT
PORTHOS HAS LOST NONE OF HIS STRENGTH.

As was his habit, D'Artagnan had calculated that every hour is worth sixty minutes, and every minute sixty seconds. Thanks to this perfectly accurate calculation, he reached the superintendent's door just as the soldier was leaving, his belt empty.

D'Artagnan presented himself at the door, which a porter,

covered with embroidery, held half open for him. D'Artagnan would have liked to enter without giving his name, but as this was impossible he gave it.

In spite of this concession, which, at least in D'Artagnan's opinion, should have removed every difficulty, the porter hesitated. However, at the repetition of the title, Captain of the King's Musketeers, the porter, without leaving the passage absolutely clear for him, did not wholly bar it.

D'Artagnan understood that orders of a positive nature had been given. He decided, therefore, to tell a falsehood, which, for that matter, did not greatly affect him, since he saw that beyond the falsehood lay the safety of the state or even his own personal interest.

He added to the declarations he had already made that the soldier who had just brought a letter for M. du Vallon was his own messenger, and that the object of the letter had been to announce his arrival.

From that moment there was no further opposition, and D'Artagnan entered.

A valet wished to accompany him, but he replied that there was no need to take such trouble on his account, as he knew perfectly well where M. du Vallon was.

There was nothing to say to a man evidently so much at home, and D'Artagnan was allowed to enter.

The terraces, the drawing-rooms, the gardens all were reviewed by the musketeer. He walked for a quarter of an hour in that more than royal residence, which contained as many wonders as articles of furniture; as many servants as there were columns and doors.

"Decidedly," said he to himself, "this place is limited only by the circumference of the earth. Could the idea have come to Porthos to return to Pierrefonds without leaving M. Fouquet's?"

He finally reached a remote part of the château, surrounded by a stone wall, on which was a profusion of thick plants covered with flowers as thick and as solid as fruit.

At equal distances on the wall were statues in timid or mysterious attitudes. There were vestals hidden beneath the long folds of the peplos; agile nymphs covered with their marble veils guarding the palace with furtive glances; a statue of Hermes, his finger on his lips; one of Iris, with extended wings; one of Night garlanded with poppies — all of which dominated the gardens and the outbuildings seen through the

trees. All these statues were outlined in white against the tall cypresses which raised their black crowns to the sky.

Around these cypresses were entwined climbing roses, which fastened their flowering chains to every fork of the branches and scattered over the lower limbs and the statues showers of perfumed blossoms.

These delights seemed to the musketeer the result of a supreme effort of the human mind. He was in a poetic frame of mind. The idea that Porthos was living in such an Eden gave him a higher idea of Porthos,—so true it is that the greatest minds are not exempt from the influence of surroundings.

D'Artagnan found the door, on which was a kind of spring, which he discovered and touched. The door opened.

D'Artagnan entered, closed the door, and stepped into a circular pavilion, in which no sound was heard save that of fountains and singing birds.

At the door of the pavilion he met a lackey.

"It is here," said D'Artagnan, unhesitatingly, "that M. le Baron du Vallon lives, is it not?"

"Yes, monsieur," replied the lackey.

"Tell him that M. le Chevalier d'Artagnan, captain of his Majesty's musketeers, is waiting for him."

D'Artagnan was admitted into the drawing-room. He did not have to wait long. A well-known step shook the floor of the next room. The door opened, or rather was thrust open, and Porthos threw himself into his friend's arms with a sort of embarrassment that did not ill become him.

"You here?" he cried.

"And you!" replied D'Artagnan. "Ah, you sly fellow!"

"Yes," said Porthos, with an uneasy smile. "Yes, you see that I am at M. Fouquet's; and you are somewhat surprised, are you not?"

"Not at all. Why should you not be one of M. Fouquet's friends? He has many, especially amongst clever men."

Porthos had the modesty not to take the compliment to himself.

"Besides," he added, "you saw me at Belle-Isle."

"All the more reason for my thinking you one of M. Fouquet's friends."

"The fact is that I know him," said Porthos, with a certain awkwardness.

"Ah, my friend," said D'Artagnan, "how badly you have treated me!"

"How so?" said Porthos.

"What, you have finished so admirable a work as that of the fortifications of Belle-Isle, and you do not tell me of it?"

Porthos colored.

"Furthermore," continued D'Artagnan, "you saw me over there. You knew I was in the King's service, and you did not guess that the King, anxious to know the clever man who had accomplished a work of which he had heard most remarkable accounts, had sent me to find out who this man was?"

"What! The King sent you to find out?"

"I should think he did. But let us speak no more of this."

"The deuce!" said Porthos; "on the contrary, let us speak of it. So the King knew we were fortifying Belle-Isle?"

"Yes; does not the King know everything?"

"But he did not know who was fortifying it?"

"No, he only suspected from what he had heard of the works that it was some celebrated soldier."

"The devil!" said Porthos. "If I had only known that!"

"You would not have run away from Vannes, would you?"

"No; what did you say when you could not find me?"

"My dear fellow, I reflected."

"Ah, yes, you reflect, do you? And to what did your reflection lead?"

"It led me to guess the whole truth."

"Ah, you have guessed it?"

"Yes."

"What did you guess? Come," said Porthos, settling himself in an armchair and assuming the air of a sphinx.

"I guessed in the first place that you were fortifying Belle-Isle."

"That was not very difficult. You saw me at work."

"Wait a moment, I guessed something further—that you were fortifying Belle-Isle by M. Fouquet's orders."

"That is true."

"But that is not all. When I have once started guessing I do not stop on the way."

"You dear fellow!"

"I guessed that M. Fouquet wished to preserve the most absolute secrecy in regard to his fortifications."

"That was his intention, I believe," said Porthos.

"Yes, but do you know why he wished to keep it secret?"

"Why, in order that it might not be known," said Porthos.

"In the first place; but his wish was subservient to an impulse of gallantry."

"It is true," said Porthos, "that I have heard it said that M. Fouquet is very gallant."

"To an impulse of gallantry towards the King."

"Oh! oh!"

"Does that surprise you?"

"Yes."

"You did not know that?"

"No."

"Well, I know it."

"Then you are a wizard."

"Not at all."

"How did you find it out, then?"

"In a very simple way. I heard M. Fouquet himself say so to the King!"

"Say what to the King?"

"That he had Belle-Isle fortified on the King's account, and that he was going to make him a present of it."

"You heard M. Fouquet say that to the King?"

"In just those words. He even added, 'Belle-Isle has been fortified by one of my friends, an engineer, a clever man, whom I shall, by permission, present to your Majesty.' 'His name?' asked the King. 'The Baron du Vallon,' replied M. Fouquet. 'Very good,' replied the King, 'you will present him to me.'"

"The King said that?"

"On the faith of a D'Artagnan."

"Oh," said Porthos, "but why have I not been presented, then?"

"Has no one spoken to you about the presentation?"

"Yes, but I'm still waiting for it."

"Don't worry, it will come —"

"Hum!" growled Porthos.

D'Artagnan pretended not to hear, and changed the conversation.

"You seem to be living in a very lonely place, my dear fellow," said he.

"I always love retirement. I am of a melancholy disposition," replied Porthos, with a sigh.

"That is strange," said D'Artagnan. "I never noticed it."

"It is since I have taken up reading," said Porthos, thoughtfully.

"But mental labor has not impaired your physical health, I hope?"

"Oh, not at all."

"Is your strength still great?"

"Too great, my friend, too great."

"I understood that during the first days after your arrival —"

"That I could not move, I suppose?"

"How was it?" said D'Artagnan, with a smile, "and why could you not move?"

Porthos realized that he had made a mistake, and tried to correct it.

"Why, I came here from Belle-Isle with poor horses, and that fatigued me."

"I am no longer surprised that as I came after you I found seven or eight dead on the road."

"I am heavy, you see," said Porthos.

"So that you were bruised?"

"My marrow melted, and that made me ill."

"Ah, poor Porthos! and how did Aramis act during all this?"

"Very well. He had me cared for by M. Fouquet's own doctor. But just imagine, at the end of a week I could not breathe any longer."

"What do you mean?"

"The room was too small. I had used up all the air."

"Indeed?"

"At least that was what I was told, and I was taken to another room."

"Where this time you could breathe?"

"Yes, more freely; but no exercise, nothing to do. The doctor said that I was not to stir. I, on the contrary, felt stronger than ever, which was the cause of a serious accident."

"What accident?"

"You may imagine, my dear friend, that I revolted against the orders of that fool of a doctor and I resolved to go out whether it suited him or not. Consequently I ordered the valet who was waiting on me to bring my clothes."

"You were quite naked, then, my poor Porthos?"

"Oh, no, I had on a magnificent dressing gown. The lackey obeyed. I dressed myself in my clothes, which had become too large, but strange thing, my feet had grown."

"Yes, I quite understand."

"And my boots too small."

"Your feet were swollen."

"That's it. You've guessed it."

"Ah ha! And that's the accident you wanted to tell me about."

"Yes, I did not carry on the same reflections that you did. I said to myself, 'Since my feet have entered my boots ten times there is no reason why they should not enter the eleventh.'"

"My dear Porthos, permit me to tell you that that time you were not logical."

"In short, they placed me opposite a partition. I tried to pull on my right boot; I pulled with my hands, I pushed with all my force, making unheard-of efforts, when suddenly the two tops of my boot were in my hands and my foot had struck out like a catapult."

"Catapult! How well up you are in terms of fortifications, dear Porthos!"

"My foot shot out, then, like a catapult and struck the partition, which it knocked down. My dear friend, I thought that like Samson I had demolished the Temple; and the number of pictures, the china, the vases, the curtains and window-panes that came crashing to the floor was marvellous."

"Indeed!"

"Without counting the fact that on the other side of the partition stood a table covered with china."

"Which you overthrew?"

"Which I hurled to the other end of the room."

Porthos began to laugh.

"As you say, it was certainly marvellous."

And D'Artagnan began to laugh too.

Whereupon Porthos laughed all the harder.

"I broke," said Porthos, in a voice indistinct from his increasing hilarity, "more than three thousand francs' worth of china. Ha! ha! ha!"

"Good!" said D'Artagnan.

"I smashed more than four thousand francs' worth of glass. Ha! ha! ha!"

"Splendid!"

"Without counting a chandelier, which fell on my head and broke into a thousand pieces. Ha! ha! ha!"

"On your head?" said D'Artagnan, who was holding his sides.

"On top."

"And your head was broken?"

"No, since I tell you, on the contrary, that it was the chandelier that broke like the glass that it was."

"Oh, was the chandelier of glass?"

"Of Venetian glass; a curiosity, my dear fellow, a rare thing without equal, weighing two hundred pounds."

"And it fell on your head?"

"Upon my head! Just imagine a crystal globe gilded, the lower part encrusted, perfumes burning at the top, and jets from which the flames issued when they were lighted."

"I quite understand. But they were not lighted?"

"Fortunately not, or I should have been burnt to a cinder."

"And you were only flattened out?"

"Not at all."

"Not at all?"

"No, the chandelier hit my skull. It seems that we have on the top of our heads an exceedingly thick crust."

"Who told you that, Porthos?"

"The doctor. A sort of dome, which would support Notre Dame de Paris."

"Bah!"

"Yes, it seems that our skulls are made in that way."

"Speak for yourself, my dear friend. Your skull may be made that way, but not other people's."

"That is possible," said Porthos, conceitedly; "so much was this the case with me, however, that the fall of the chandelier on the dome which we have on the top of our heads caused a report like the detonation of a cannon. The crystal was broken and I fell, completely covered."

"With blood, my poor Porthos?"

"Not at all. With perfumes which smelled like cream. It was delicious, but it was too strong; I grew dizzy from the odor. You have felt like that sometimes, have you not, D'Artagnan?"

"Yes, when smelling the lily-of-the-valley. So that, my poor

friend, you were knocked down by the shock and overpowered by the perfume?"

"Yes; but what was especially remarkable, and the physician affirmed on his honor that he had never seen anything like it —"

"At least you had a bump!" interrupted D'Artagnan.

"I had five."

"Why five?"

"At the bottom the chandelier had five excessively sharp gilt ornaments."

"Oh!"

"These five ornaments sank into my hair, which, as you see, is very thick."

"Fortunately."

"And made marks on my skin. But notice the strangeness of it,—these things happen only to me,—instead of making holes they made bumps. The doctor was never able to explain this to me satisfactorily."

"Well, I can."

"That would be doing me a great favor," said Porthos, winking his eyes, which with him was a sign of the greatest attention.

"Since you have been working your brain in studies of a lofty nature, and in important calculations, your head has profited so that now it is too full of science."

"You think so?"

"I am sure of it. The result is that instead of letting any foreign matter penetrate to the interior of your head, your bony box, which is already too full, availed itself of the openings in it to allow some of this excess to escape."

"Ah!" said Porthos, to whom this explanation seemed clearer than that of the doctor.

"The five protuberances caused by the five ornaments of the chandelier were certainly scientific globules brought to the surface by the force of circumstances."

"The fact is," said Porthos, "it made me feel worse outside than inside. I will even confess that when I put my hat on my head and clapped it down with my fist with that graceful energy which we gentlemen of the sword possess,—well, if my fist were not well regulated I felt great pain."

"Porthos, I can believe you."

"Then, my good friend," said the giant, "M. Fouquet decided,

seeing the frailty of the house, to give me another lodging. They brought me here in consequence."

"It is the private park, is it not?"

"Yes."

"Where the rendezvous are held? The one which is so celebrated in the mysterious stories about the superintendent?"

"I do not know. I have had neither rendezvous nor mysterious stories, but I have been authorized to exert my muscles in it and I take advantage of the permission by uprooting trees."

"What for?"

"To keep my hand in and also to get at some birds' nests. I find that more convenient than climbing."

"You are as pastoral as Tyrcis, my dear Porthos."

"Yes, I like the little eggs. I like them much better than the larger ones. You have no idea how delicate an omelet is made of four or five hundred eggs of linnets, chaffinches, starlings, blackbirds, and thrushes."

"But five hundred eggs is monstrous!"

"A salad bowl will hold them," said Porthos.

For five minutes D'Artagnan looked admiringly at Porthos as if seeing him for the first time, while Porthos expanded joyfully beneath his friend's look. They remained thus for several minutes, D'Artagnan gazing, Porthos swelling with pride.

D'Artagnan was evidently thinking up some new topic of conversation.

"Are you much amused here, Porthos?" he asked at length, having found no doubt what he had been seeking.

"Not always."

"I can imagine that; but when you are too much bored what will you do?"

"Oh, I shall not be here for long. Aramis is waiting until the last bump has disappeared to present me to the King, who, they tell me, cannot bear bumps."

"Aramis is still in Paris, then?"

"No."

"Where is he?"

"At Fontainebleau."

"Alone?"

"With M. Fouquet."

"Very good, but do you know one thing?"

"No. Tell me and I shall know."

"I think that Aramis is forgetting you"

"You think so?"

"Yonder, you see, they are laughing, dancing, banqueting, and drinking M. de Mazarin's wines. Do you know that there is a ballet there every evening?"

"The devil!"

"I assure you that your dear Aramis is forgetting you."

"That may be; I myself have thought so sometimes."

"Unless he is betraying you, the sly fellow!"

"Oh!"

"You know that Aramis is a sly fox."

"Yes; but to betray me —"

"Listen; in the first place, he hides you."

"He hides me? I — hidden?"

"Undoubtedly."

"I wish you would prove that to me."

"Nothing easier. Do you ever go out?"

"Never."

"Do you ride horseback?"

"Never."

"Are your friends allowed to come to you?"

"Never."

"Well, my friend, never to go out, never to ride horseback, never to see your friends, is called being hidden."

"Why should Aramis hide me?" asked Porthos.

"Come," said D'Artagnan, "be frank, Porthos."

"As gold."

"It was Aramis who drew the plan of the fortifications at Belle-Isle, was it not?"

Porthos colored.

"Yes," said he, "but that is all he did."

"Exactly; and my opinion is that it is not a very great affair."

"That is mine, also."

"Good! I am delighted that we are of the same opinion."

"He never even came to Belle-Isle," said Porthos.

"There, now."

"It was I who went to Vannes, as you may have seen."

"Say as I did see. Well, that is the case, my dear Porthos. Aramis, who drew only the plans, would like to pass himself off as the engineer, while you, who built stone by stone the wall, the citadel, and the bastions, he would like to relegate to the rank of constructor."

"Of constructor — that is, mason?"

"Mason, that's it."

"Plasterer?"

"Exactly."

"Hod-carrier?"

"That's it."

"Oh! oh! My dear Aramis, apparently you think you are still twenty-five years old."

"That is not all; he thinks you are fifty."

"I should greatly have liked to see him at work."

"Yes."

"A fellow who has the gout!"

"Yes."

"Who has the gravel!"

"Yes."

"Who has lost three teeth!"

"Four."

"While I — look!"

And Porthos, opening his thick lips, showed two rows of teeth only less white than the snow and as even, as hard, and as strong as ivory.

"You cannot imagine, Porthos," said D'Artagnan, "how much the King likes good teeth. Yours decide me. I shall present you to the King myself."

"You?"

"Why not? Do you think I am less in favor at court than Aramis?"

"Oh, no."

"Do you think I have the slightest pretensions in regard to the fortifications at Belle-Isle?"

"Oh, certainly not."

"It is your interest alone which would make me act."

"I do not doubt it."

"Well, I am an intimate friend of the King, and the proof of this is that when there is anything disagreeable to tell him I am the one to do it."

"But, my dear friend, if you present me —"

"Well?"

"Aramis will be angry."

"With me?"

"No, with me."

"Bah! It makes no difference whether he or I present you, since you are to be presented."

"They're going to have some clothes made for me."

"Yours are splendid."

"Oh, those I had ordered were made more beautiful."

"Take care. The King likes simplicity."

"In that case I shall be simple, but what will M. Fouquet say when he knows I have gone?"

"Are you a prisoner, then, on parole?"

"No, not exactly, but I promised him not to leave without letting him know."

"Wait a minute. We will come back to that. Have you anything to do here?"

"Nothing of any importance."

"Unless you are Aramis' representative for something important."

"Faith, no."

"What I tell you, you understand, is in your interests. I suppose, for instance, that you are commissioned to send letters or messages to Aramis?"

"Letters, yes. I do send him certain letters."

"To what address?"

"To Fontainebleau."

"Have you any of these letters?"

"Why —"

"Let me speak. Have you any of these letters?"

"I have just received one."

"Interesting?"

"I suppose so."

"Don't you read them?"

"I'm not inquisitive." And Porthos drew from his pocket the soldier's letter which he had not read, but which D'Artagnan had perused.

"You know what must be done?" said D'Artagnan.

"What I always do, of course! Send it on."

"Not at all."

"What, then? Keep it?"

"No. Were you not told that this letter is important?"

"Very important."

"Well, you must take it yourself to Fontainebleau."

"To Aramis?"

"Yes."

"That is plausible."

"And since the King is there —"

"You will take advantage of the fact?"

"To present you to the King."

"Zounds, D'Artagnan! There is no one like you for finding expedients."

"So, instead of sending to our friend messages which may or may not be delivered, we ourselves will take the letter."

"I did not even think of that, yet it is very simple."

"And because it is urgent, my dear Porthos, we should set out at once."

"In fact," said Porthos, "the sooner we start the less Aramis' letter will be delayed."

"Porthos, you always reason well, and logic with you is a help to your imagination."

"You think so?" said Porthos.

"It is the result of deep reading," replied D'Artagnan.

"Come, let us be off."

"But," said Porthos, "my promise to M. Fouquet?"

"What promise?"

"Not to leave Saint-Mandé without letting him know."

"Ah, my dear Porthos," said D'Artagnan, "how young you are!"

"How so?"

"You will reach Fontainebleau, will you not?"

"Yes."

"You will find M. Fouquet there?"

"Yes."

"With the King, probably?"

"With the King," repeated Porthos, majestically.

"You will approach him and say, 'M. Fouquet, I have the honor to tell you that I have just left Saint-Mandé.'"

"And," said Porthos, with the same majestic manner, "seeing me at Fontainebleau with the King, M. Fouquet will not be able to tell me that I am lying."

"My dear Porthos, I was opening my lips to tell you that, but you anticipate me in everything. Oh, Porthos, what a fortunate nature you have! Age has not affected you."

"Not much."

"Then everything is said?"

"I think so."

"You have no further scruples?"

"No."

"In that case I will take you away."

"Exactly. I will go and have my horses saddled."

"You have horses here?"

"I have five."

"You had them sent from Pierrefonds?"

"M. Fouquet gave them to me."

"My dear Porthos, we shall not need five horses for two people. Besides, I have already three in Paris, which makes eight, and that would be too many."

"It would not be too many if I had my servants here, but, alas, I have not."

"Do you miss them?"

"I miss Mousqueton. Mousqueton is necessary to me."

"Kind heart!" said D'Artagnan. "But believe me, leave your horses here as you left Mousqueton there."

"Why?"

"Because later —"

"Well?"

"Well, later, it might be well if you had taken nothing from M. Fouquet."

"I do not understand," said Porthos.

"It is not necessary that you should."

"And yet —"

"I will explain all that later, Porthos."

"It is politics, I'll wager."

"And the most subtle."

Porthos bent his head at the word "politics," but after a moment's reflection he said:

"I will confess to you, D'Artagnan, that I am no politician."

"I know that well enough!"

"Oh, everybody knows it. You told it to me yourself, you, the bravest of the brave."

"What did I tell you, Porthos?"

"That every one has his day. You told me so, and I have proved it. There are days when one feels less pleasure than on others in receiving sword-thrusts."

"That's my idea."

"It is mine also, although I do not believe in blows which kill."

"The devil! Yet you have killed."

"Yes, but I have never been killed."

"The reason is a good one."

"So I do not believe I shall ever die from a sword-thrust or a gunshot."

"You are afraid of nothing, then. Of water, perhaps?"

"No, I swim like an otter."

"Of a quartan fever."

"I have never had it, and I don't think I ever shall. But I will admit one thing."

Porthos lowered his voice.

"What is that," asked D'Artagnan, doing likewise.

"I will confess to you," said Porthos, "that I have a frightful dread of politics."

"Ah, pshaw!" exclaimed D'Artagnan.

"Softly," said Porthos, in a stentorian voice, "I have seen his Eminence M. le Cardinal de Richelieu and his Eminence M. le Cardinal de Mazarin, the one with his red, the other with his black politics. I was no more pleased with the one than with the other. The first cut off the heads of M. de Marillac, M. de Thou, M. de Cinq-Mars, M. de Chalais, M. de Boutteville, M. de Montmorency. The second had a crowd of Frondeurs to which we belonged, cut to pieces."

"To which, on the contrary, we did not belong," said D'Artagnan.

"Oh, yes, for I drew my sword for the cardinal; I struck for the King."

"My dear Porthos!"

"I have finished. My fear of politics is such that if there is any politics in the matter I should prefer to return to Pierrefonds."

"You would be right if that were the case, but with me, my dear Porthos, there is no more politics, that is certain. You have labored to fortify Belle-Isle. The King wanted to know the name of the engineer who carried on the work; you are retiring, like all men of real worth. Perhaps Aramis wishes to put you under a bushel, but I will take you, I will announce you, I will produce you. The King will reward you and my politics are at an end."

"And mine too, you can wager," said Porthos, extending his hand to D'Artagnan.

But D'Artagnan was acquainted with the hand of Porthos.

He knew that once imprisoned behind the baron's five fingers, an ordinary hand did not escape without being crushed. So he held out to his friend, not his hand, but his fist.

Porthos did not even notice it. Then they both set out for Saint-Mandé.

The servants talked a little, and whispered a few words which D'Artagnan understood, but which he took care not to let Porthos understand.

"Our friend," said he to himself, "was really and truly Aramis' prisoner. Let us see what will be the result of the liberation of this conspirator."

CHAPTER L.

THE RAT AND THE CHEESE.

D'ARTAGNAN and Porthos returned on foot as D'Artagnan had come.

When D'Artagnan, on entering the shop of the Pilon d'Or, announced to Planchet that M. du Vallon would be one of the privileged travellers; when Porthos entered the shop, and his plume struck the wooden candles suspended over the front, a melancholy presentiment took the place of the pleasure Planchet had promised himself for the next day.

But our grocer had a heart of gold, a precious relic of that good time which, for those who are growing old, is and has always been the time of their youth; and for those who are young the old age of their forefather. Planchet, in spite of an internal shiver repressed as soon as felt, received Porthos with respect, mingled with tender cordiality.

Porthos, somewhat stiff at first because of the social difference which existed at that time between a baron and a grocer, finally became more gentle as he saw in Planchet such goodwill and kindly feeling.

He was particularly pleased by the liberty which was given or rather offered to him to plunge his great hands into the boxes of dried fruits and preserves, into the sacks of almonds and nuts, and into the drawers full of sweetmeats. So notwithstanding the invitations Planchet gave him to go up to

the entresol, he chose for his favorite spot, during the evening he had to spend at Planchet's, the shop in which his fingers always found what he had smelled and seen.

Beautiful figs from Provence, filberts from the forest, plums from Touraine, became for Porthos the objects of his devoted attention for five uninterrupted hours. The nuts were cracked between his teeth as between millstones, and the shells were scattered over the floor, where they were trampled on by all who entered. Porthos pulled from the stalk at one mouthful bunches of the rich Muscatel raisins with their beautiful colors, half a pound of which passed at one gulp from his mouth to his stomach.

In a corner of the shop the clerks, huddled together in fright, looked at one another without daring to speak. They did not know Porthos, for they had never seen him. The race of those Titans who had worn the last cuirasses of Hugh Capet, Philip Augustus, and Francis I. had begun to disappear. They wondered if he were not the ogre of the fairy tales who was going to put into his insatiable stomach Planchet's whole establishment, without in the least displacing the barrels and boxes.

Cracking, munching, chewing, nibbling, sucking, and swallowing, Porthos said occasionally to the grocer:

"You have a fine stock of goods, friend Planchet."

"He will soon have none at all if this continues," growled the head clerk, who had Planchet's word that he would succeed him.

And in his despair he approached Porthos, who blocked the entire passage from the rear to the shop. He hoped that Porthos would rise, and that this movement would divert him from his devouring ideas.

"What do you want, my friend?" asked Porthos, affably.

"I should like to pass, monsieur, if it will not trouble you too much."

"Very well," said Porthos, "that will not trouble me at all."

And he took the man by the waist, lifted him from the floor, and placed him gently on the other side, smiling all the time with the same affable expression.

As Porthos put him down, the legs of the terrified man failed him, so that he fell back on the corn-sacks.

But seeing the gentleness of the giant, he ventured again:

"Ah, monsieur, be careful!"

"About what, my friend?" asked Porthos.

"You are putting fire into your body."

"What do you mean, my good fellow?" said Porthos.

"All those things are very heating, monsieur."

"What things?"

"The raisins, the nuts, the almonds."

"Yes; but if the almonds, nuts, and raisins are heating —"

"There is no doubt of that, monsieur."

"Honey is cooling."

And, stretching his hand towards a small open cask of honey, Porthos plunged into it the scoop with which customers were served, and swallowed a good half-pound.

"My friend," said Porthos, "I will ask you for some water now."

"In a pail, monsieur?" asked the man, innocently.

"No, in a carafe. That will be enough," replied Porthos, good-naturedly. And raising the carafe to his lips, as a trumpeter does his trumpet, he emptied it at a single swallow.

Planchet was shaken to the depths of his sense of ownership and self-respect.

However, — a host worthy of the ancient ideas of hospitality, — he pretended to be talking earnestly to D'Artagnan and constantly repeated:

"What joy! What happiness!"

"At what hour shall we have supper, Planchet?" asked Porthos. "I am hungry."

The head clerk clasped his hands. The other two rolled under the counter, fearing lest Porthos might have a taste for human flesh.

"We shall take only a light lunch here," said D'Artagnan, "and have supper at Planchet's country seat."

"Ah! So it is to your country house that we are going, Planchet! So much the better."

"You overwhelm me, M. le Baron."

The *M. le Baron* had a great effect on the clerks, who detected a man of the highest position in an appetite of that kind. The title reassured them. They had never heard of an ogre by the name of *M. le Baron*.

"I will take a few biscuits to eat on the road," said Porthos,

carelessly. And with these words he emptied a whole jar of aniseed biscuits into the deep pocket of his doublet.

"My shop is saved," cried Planchet.

"Yes, like the cheese," said the head clerk.

"What cheese?"

"The Holland cheese in which a rat entered, and only the rind of which was left."

Planchet looked around his shop, and at sight of all that had escaped Porthos' teeth he thought the comparison exaggerated.

The head clerk divined what was passing in his master's mind.

"Look out he does not return," said he.

"Have you any fruit here?" said Porthos, as he went up to the entresol where they had announced that the lunch would be served.

"Alas!" thought the grocer, addressing a look of entreaty to D'Artagnan which the latter half understood.

After eating they started off.

It was late when the three travellers, who had left Paris about six o'clock, reached Fontainebleau. The journey had been lively. Porthos took a fancy to Planchet's society, because the latter was very respectful and talked to him pleasantly about his meadows, his woods, and his rabbit-warrens. Porthos had the taste and the pride of a proprietor.

When D'Artagnan saw his two companions in earnest conversation, he took the lower side of the road, and letting the bridle drop upon his horse's neck, separated himself from the whole world, as he had done from Porthos and Planchet.

The moon shone softly through the dark foliage of the forest. The balmy odors of the open country greeted the nostrils of the horses, which snorted and pranced with joy.

Porthos and Planchet began to talk about harvests.

Planchet admitted to Porthos that in the advanced years of his life he had neglected agriculture for commerce, but that his childhood had been spent in Picardy, in the beautiful meadows where the grass grew as high as his knees, under the green apple-trees laden with their red apples; he had sworn that his fortune once made he would return to Nature and end his days

as he had begun them, as near as possible to the earth to which all men must return at last.

"Well, well," said Porthos, "in that case, my dear Planchet, your retirement is near at hand."

"How so?"

"You seem to be in the way of making a small fortune."

"Why, yes," replied Planchet, "we are getting on."

"Come, what is the extent of your ambition, and at what figure do you intend to retire?"

"Monsieur," said Planchet, without replying to the question, engrossing as it was, "one thing gives me a good deal of trouble."

"What is that?" asked Porthos, looking behind him, as if seeking the thing that troubled Planchet in order to rid him of it.

"Formerly," said the grocer, "you called me plain Planchet, and addressed me in much more familiar terms."

"Certainly I did formerly," said honest Porthos, with an embarrassment full of delicacy, "but formerly —"

"Formerly I was M. d'Artagnan's lackey. Is not that what you mean? Well, if I am no longer his lackey, I am still his servant, and furthermore since then —"

"Well, Planchet?"

"Since then I have had the honor of being his partner."

"What!" said Porthos, "has D'Artagnan gone into the grocery business?"

"No, no," said D'Artagnan, whom these words roused from his reverie and who turned his thoughts to the conversation with that readiness and rapidity which distinguished every effort of his mind and body, "it was not D'Artagnan who went into the grocery business, but Planchet who entered politics."

"Yes," said Planchet, with mingled pride and satisfaction, "we carried on a little transaction which brought me in a hundred thousand livres and M. d'Artagnan two hundred thousand."

"Oh!" said Porthos admiringly.

"So that, M. le Baron," continued the grocer, "I again beg you to call me Planchet as you used to do, and to address me familiarly. You have no idea what pleasure it would give me."

"If that is the case I will do so, my dear Planchet," replied Porthos.

And as he was near Planchet he raised his hand to clap him on the shoulder in token of friendly cordiality. But a providential movement of his horse made him miss his aim, so that his hand fell upon the crupper of Planchet's horse. The animal bent its withers under the stroke.

D'Artagnan began to laugh and to think aloud.

"Take care, Planchet, for if Porthos loves you too much he will caress you, and if he caresses you he will flatten you out. Porthos is still very strong, you see."

"Oh," said Planchet, "Mousqueton is not dead yet. M. le Baron is very fond of him."

"Certainly," said Porthos, with a sigh which caused the three horses to rear simultaneously, "and I was saying to D'Artagnan only this morning how much I missed him. But, tell me, Planchet —"

"Thank you, M. le Baron, thank you!"

"Good boy! How many acres of park have you?"

"Of park?"

"Yes. We will count the meadows next, and then the woods."

"Where, monsieur?"

"At your château."

"But, M. le Baron, I have no château, no park, no meadows, no woods."

"What have you, then?" asked Porthos. "And why call it a country seat?"

"I did not call it a country seat, M. le Baron," replied Planchet, somewhat humiliated; "but simply a temporary lodging!"

"Ah," said Porthos, "I understand. You are modest."

"No, M. le Baron, I am telling the truth. I have two rooms for friends, that is all."

"But in that case, where do your friends walk?"

"In the first place, in the King's forest, which is very beautiful."

"Yes, there is no doubt that the forest is beautiful," said Porthos; "almost as beautiful as my forest at Berri."

Planchet opened his eyes wide.

"Have you a forest like that of Fontainebleau, M. le Baron?" he stammered.

"Oh, I have two; but that of Berri is my favorite."

"Why?" asked Planchet, affably.

"Because in the first place I do not know where it ends; and in the second place because it is filled with poachers."

"How can poachers make this forest so pleasant?"

"Because they hunt my game and I hunt them, which in times of peace is for me a reproduction of war on a small scale."

They had reached this point in the conversation when Planchet, looking up, saw the first houses of Fontainebleau outlined clearly against the sky, while above the compact and irregular mass rose the pointed roofs of the château, the slates of which glistened in the moonlight like the scales of a great fish.

"Gentlemen," said Planchet, "I have the honor to announce that we have arrived at Fontainebleau."

CHAPTER LI.

PLANCHET'S COUNTRY SEAT.

THE cavaliers raised their heads and saw that what honest Planchet had said was the truth.

Ten minutes later they were in the Rue du Lyon on the side opposite the inn of the Beau Paon. A high hedge of bushy elders, hawthorn, and wild hops formed a dark, impenetrable fence, behind which rose a white house with a broad, tiled roof. Two windows of the house looked upon the street. Both were dark. Between them a small door, with a porch supported by pillars, formed the entrance. The door was reached by an elevated step.

Planchet dismounted as if he were about to knock at the door; but on second thoughts he took his horse by the bridle and went about thirty paces farther, his two companions following. Then he went to the door of a cart-house, another thirty paces away, which was lighted by an iron grating, and raising a wooden latch, the only lock on the door, he entered, leading his horse by the bridle, into a small court-yard filled

with smoke, the pleasing odor of which revealed the proximity of a stable.

"It smells good," said Porthos loudly, dismounting. "I might think myself among my own cows at Pierrefonds."

"I have only one cow," Planchet hastened to say modestly.

"And I have thirty," said Porthos, "or rather I do not know how many I have."

The two cavaliers entered and Planchet fastened the door behind them.

Meanwhile D'Artagnan, who had dismounted with his usual agility, inhaled the good air, and, happy as a Parisian who sees the green fields, he plucked a bit of honeysuckle with one hand and some eglantine with the other.

Porthos laid his hand on some peas which were climbing around poles, and ate or rather browsed upon them, shells and all.

Planchet at once set to work to awaken in his shed an old, decrepit peasant, who was lying on some moss, covered with an old coat. This peasant recognized Planchet and called him master, to the great delight of the grocer.

"Stable the horses, my good fellow, and feed them liberally," said Planchet.

"Yes, fine beasts they are!" said the peasant. "Oh, they shall be filled to bursting!"

"Gently, gently, my man," said D'Artagnan, "do not go so fast; some oats and a bed of straw, nothing more."

"And some bran and water for my horse," said Porthos, "for it is very warm, I think."

"Oh, don't be afraid, gentlemen," replied Planchet, "Father Célestin is an old gendarme of Ivry; he knows all about horses. So come into the house."

He led his friends along a covered walk, through a kitchen garden and a small paddock, and came out into a little flower garden, beyond which rose the house, the principal wall of which was, as we have seen, on the street.

As they approached they could see, through two open windows on the ground floor, which opened from a room, the interior of Planchet's home. This room, softly lighted by a lamp which had been placed on a table, seemed, from the end of the garden, a smiling image of repose, comfort, and happiness.

Whether the rays from this luminous centre fell upon a piece of old china, an article of furniture polished until it shone, or a weapon hanging on the wall, the soft light was clearly reflected and lingered everywhere upon something agreeable to the eye.

The lamp which lighted the room, while the foliage of jasmine and climbing roses hung from the window casements, brightly illuminated a damask tablecloth as white as snow. The table was laid for two. Amber-colored wine sparkled in a tall cut-glass decanter, and a large blue china jug with a silver cover was filled with foaming cider. Near the table in a high-backed armchair slept a woman of thirty, her face fresh and healthy. Upon her knees a great cat, its paws folded beneath it, with eyes half closed, was purring in that characteristic way which signifies in felines, "I am perfectly happy."

The two friends paused before this window in great surprise. Seeing their astonishment, Planchet was filled with a gentle delight.

"Ah, Planchet, you rascal," said D'Artagnan, "I understand your absences."

"Oh, there is some white linen," said Porthos, in a voice of thunder.

At the sound the cat took fright, the housekeeper awoke with a start, and Planchet assuming a gracious air ushered his two companions into the room in which the table was laid.

"Permit me, my dear," said he, "to present to you M. le Chevalier d'Artagnan, my patron."

D'Artagnan took the lady's hand like a courtier, with the same chivalrous manner with which he would have taken Madame's.

"M. le Baron du Vallon de Bracieux de Pierrefonds," added Planchet.

Porthos made a bow with which Anne of Austria would have declared herself satisfied unless she were more than exacting.

Then it was Planchet's turn.

He embraced the lady frankly, not, however, until he had made a sign as if begging permission of D'Artagnan and Porthos, a permission which of course was granted him.

D'Artagnan complimented Planchet.

"You are a man who knows how to regulate his life," said he.

"Monsieur," replied Planchet, laughing, "life is capital which a man should invest as well as he can."

"And you get good interest on yours," said Porthos, with a laugh like a thunder-clap.

Planchet turned to his housekeeper.

"My dear," said he, "you see the two men who have influenced a considerable part of my life. I have often told you about them."

"And about two others as well," said the lady, with a decided Flemish accent.

"Madame is from Holland?" asked D'Artagnan.

Porthos curled his mustache, which was noticed by D'Artagnan, who noticed everything.

"I am from Antwerp," replied the lady.

"And her name is Madame Gechter," said Planchet.

"You do not call her madame?" said D'Artagnan.

"Why not?" asked Planchet.

"Because that would make her grow older every time you called her so."

"I call her Trüchen."

"A charming name," said Porthos.

"Trüchen," said Planchet, "came to me from Flanders with her virtue and two thousand florins. She ran away from an ugly husband who beat her. Being a Picard, I have always loved the Artesian women; from Artois to Flanders is only a step. She came crying to her god-father, my predecessor in the Rue des Lombards. She placed her two thousand florins with me, and I have increased them until they have brought her ten thousand."

"Bravo, Planchet!"

"She is free and rich. She has a cow, a maid-servant, and Father Célestin; she mends all my linen, knits my winter stockings, sees me only once a fortnight, and seems happy."

"Indeed I am happy," said Trüchen, innocently.

Porthos curled the other side of his mustache.

"The deuce!" thought D'Artagnan. "Can Porthos have intentions —"

Meanwhile Trüchen, understanding what was wanted, had aroused her cook, laid two extra covers, placed on the table every delicacy which could make of a supper a meal, of a meal

a feast: fresh butter, salt beef, anchovies, tunny, Planchet's whole grocery shop; chickens, vegetables, salad, fish from the pond, fish from the river, game from the forest, all the produce of the province.

Moreover, Planchet returned from the cellar laden with ten bottles, the glass of which was lost beneath a thick covering of gray dust.

This sight delighted the heart of Porthos.

"I am hungry," said he, and he seated himself beside Madame Trüchen with a killing glance.

D'Artagnan placed himself on the other side.

Planchet discreetly and delightedly took his seat opposite.

"Do not be troubled," said he, "if during supper Trüchen often leaves the table, for she will have to prepare your sleeping-rooms."

In fact the housekeeper made numerous trips, and there could be heard on the first floor the groaning of the wooden bedsteads and the creaking of the rollers upon the floor.

Meanwhile the three men, especially Porthos, were eating and drinking. It was wonderful to see them. The ten bottles were ten empty ones when Trüchen returned with the cheese. D'Artagnan had preserved all his dignity. Porthos, on the contrary, had lost some of his. They were singing battle-songs and reciting verses.

D'Artagnan suggested a new trip to the cellar, and as Planchet could not walk with the steadiness of a well-trained foot soldier, the captain of the musketeers proposed to accompany him. They set off humming songs which were enough to frighten away the greatest Flemish devils.

Trüchen remained at the table with Porthos.

While the two gourmets were behind the fire-wood making a choice, they heard the hard, sharp sound made by the touch of two lips to a cheek.

"Porthos imagines himself at La Rochelle," thought D'Artagnan.

They returned freighted with bottles.

Planchet was singing so much that he noticed nothing.

D'Artagnan, who always saw everything, remarked how much redder Trüchen's left cheek was than her right.

Porthos was smiling on Trüchen's left, and with both hands was twisting his mustaches. Trüchen was smiling also at the great lord.

The sparkling wine of Anjou first made of the three men three devils, then three imbeciles. D'Artagnan no longer had the strength to hold a candle to lighten Planchet up his own staircase. Planchet pulled Porthos, who pushed Trüchen, herself exceedingly jovial. It was D'Artagnan who found the rooms and the beds. Porthos threw himself into his, having been undressed by his friend the musketeer.

D'Artagnan fell upon his, saying, "*Mordieux!* I swore not to touch that light wine, which is like gunpowder. Fie! if the musketeers were to see their captain in such a state!"

And drawing the curtains of his bed, he added, "Fortunately they will not see me."

Planchet was carried up in the arms of Trüchen, who undressed him and drew the curtains and closed the door.

"The country is amusing," said Porthos, stretching his limbs, which passed through the footboard with an enormous crash, to which no one paid any attention, so well had they been entertained at Planchet's country seat.

By two o'clock in the morning every one was snoring.

CHAPTER LII.

WHAT WAS SEEN FROM PLANCHET'S HOUSE.

THE next morning found the heroes sleeping soundly.

Trüchen had closed the blinds like a woman who fears for heavy eyes the first visit of the rising sun.

So it was still dark behind Porthos' curtains and beneath Planchet's canopy when D'Artagnan, awakened first by an indiscreet ray which crept in through the windows, sprang from bed as if to arrive the first at an assault. He stormed the chamber of Porthos, which was next his own.

The worthy Porthos was sleeping like rumbling thunder; in the darkness his gigantic form was proudly spread out and his swollen fist hung down outside the bed upon the carpet.

D'Artagnan woke Porthos, who rubbed his eyes good-naturedly.

Meanwhile Planchet was dressing and met at their bedroom

doors his two guests who were still somewhat unsteady from the effects of the previous evening.

Although it was yet early the entire household was up. The cook was pitilessly slaughtering in the lower court-yard and Father Célestin was gathering cherries in the garden.

Porthos, always lively, held out a hand to Planchet, and D'Artagnan begged permission to embrace Madame Trüchen. She, who bore no ill-will to those whom she had vanquished, approached Porthos, to whom the same favor was accorded. Porthos embraced Madame Trüchen with a great sigh.

Then Planchet took his two friends by the hand.

"I am going to show you the house," said he; "last evening it was like an oven and we could see nothing, but to-day everything is changed and you will be pleased."

"Let us begin with the view," said D'Artagnan, "that delights me beyond everything. I have always lived in royal houses, and princes know pretty well how to choose their points of view."

"I have always been fond of views myself," said Porthos. "At my château of Pierrefonds I have had four avenues laid out, each of which ends in a different outlook."

"You shall see my prospect," said Planchet. And he led his two guests to a window.

"Ah, yes, this is the Rue de Lyon," said D'Artagnan.

"Yes, I have two windows on this side, but it is not much of a view, — you see the noisy inn and a disagreeable neighborhood. I had four windows, but I have kept only two."

"Let us go on," said D'Artagnan.

They entered a corridor leading to the bedrooms, and Planchet pushed open the blinds.

"Oh, look!" said Porthos, "what is that over there?"

"The forest," said Planchet. "It is the horizon, always a thick line, yellow in the spring, green in the summer, red in the autumn, and white in the winter."

"Very good; but it is a curtain which prevents one's seeing farther."

"Yes," said Planchet, "but one can see what lies between."

"Ah, that great meadow," said Porthos; "see, what is that? Crosses, stones."

"Why, that is the cemetery," cried D'Artagnan.

"Exactly," said Planchet, "I assure you it is very curious. Not a day passes that some one is not buried. Fontainebleau is quite a place. Sometimes one sees young girls, clothed in white, carrying banners; at other times some of the town council or rich citizens, with choristers and all the influential men of the parish; sometimes officers of the King's household."

"I should not care for all that," said Porthos.

"It is not very diverting," said D'Artagnan.

"I assure you that it inspires pious thoughts," replied Planchet.

"Oh, I don't deny that."

"But," continued Planchet, "we must die some day, and there is a maxim somewhere which I remember about the thought of death being salutary."

"I do not say that it is not," said Porthos.

"But," objected D'Artagnan, "the thought of green meadows, of flowers, of rivers, of blue horizons, of great endless plains, is salutary too."

"If I had them I should not reject them," said Planchet, "but having only this little cemetery full of flowers, so mossy, shady, and quiet, I am contented with it, and I think of those city people who live in the Rue des Lombards, for example, and who have to listen to the rumbling of two thousand vehicles a day, and to the tramp through the mud of a hundred and fifty thousand feet."

"But living," said Porthos, "living!"

"That," said Planchet, timidly, "is just why it rests me to see a few dead."

"This devil of a Planchet," said D'Artagnan, "was born to be poet as well as grocer."

"Monsieur," said Planchet, "I am one of that good-natured sort of men whom God has created to live for a certain time, and who find good in everything that accompanies them in their sojourn through life."

D'Artagnan sat down near the window, and as this philosophy of Planchet's seemed somewhat substantial, he pondered over it.

"Ah," cried Porthos, "we are going to have a comedy this very minute. Do I not hear chanting?"

"Why, yes," said D'Artagnan.

"Oh, it is a poor kind of burial," said Planchet, scornfully.

"There is only the officiating priest, the beadle, and one chorister. You see, gentlemen, that the deceased could not have been a prince."

"No; no one is following his coffin."

"Yes," said Porthos, "I see a man."

"Yes, that is so; a man wrapped in a cloak," said D'Artagnan.

"It is not worth looking at," said Planchet.

"It interests me," said D'Artagnan quickly, leaning on the window-sill.

"There! You are beginning to like it," said Planchet, delightedly. "I was just like that. At first I was so sad that I could do nothing but make the sign of the cross all day long, and the chants were like so many nails driven into my head. But since then they lull me to sleep, and I have never seen such pretty birds as those in this cemetery."

"I am no longer interested," said Porthos. "I would rather go downstairs."

With a bound Planchet offered his hand to Porthos to show him the garden.

"What, are you going to stay here?" said Porthos to D'Artagnan, turning around.

"Yes; I will join you later."

"Well, M. d'Artagnan is not wrong," said Planchet; "have they begun to bury it?"

"Not yet."

"Oh, yes, the grave-digger is waiting until the cords are fastened around the coffin. But look! a woman has entered the cemetery from the other end."

"Yes, yes, my dear Planchet!" said D'Artagnan, hastily. "But leave me, leave me! I am beginning the salutary meditations. Do not interrupt me."

Planchet gone, D'Artagnan devoured with his eyes from behind the half-closed shutters the scene before him.

The two pall-bearers had unfastened the straps of the litter and were lowering their burden into the grave. A few feet away the man in the cloak, sole spectator of the melancholy scene, was leaning against a great cypress, keeping his face completely hidden from the grave-digger and the priests. In five minutes the coffin was covered. The grave once filled, the priests turned away. The grave-digger spoke a few words to them and followed. The man in the cloak bowed to

them as they passed and put a piece of money into the gravedigger's hand.

"*Mordoux!*" murmured D'Artagnan, "that is Aramis!"

Aramis in fact remained alone on that side at least; for scarcely had he turned his head when a woman's step and the rustling of a dress were heard on the path beside him. He turned immediately and took off his hat with the respect of a courtier. He led the lady to the shelter of some walnut and lime trees which overshadowed an ornate tomb.

"Ah, the idea!" said D'Artagnan. "The Bishop of Vannes holding a rendezvous. He is still the Abbé Aramis wheedling, courting, playing the coxcomb at Noisy-le-Sec. Yes," added the musketeer, "but in a cemetery a rendezvous is sacred." And he began to laugh.

The conversation lasted a full half hour.

D'Artagnan could not see the lady's face, for she kept her back turned to him, but he could see perfectly from the erect attitude of the two speakers, from their gestures, from the measured and careful manner with which they glanced at each other by way of attack or defence, that they were not speaking of love. At the end of the conversation the lady rose and bowed low to Aramis.

"Oh," said D'Artagnan, "this ends like a love meeting. The cavalier kneels at the beginning, then the young lady is tamed, and it is she who supplicates. Who is this lady? I would give anything to know."

But that was impossible.

Aramis was the first to go. The lady wrapped her hood about her and followed.

D'Artagnan could no longer contain himself. He ran to the window which looked out on the Rue de Lyon.

Aramis was just entering the inn.

The lady was going in an opposite direction. Apparently she was about to rejoin an equipage consisting of two led horses and a carriage which could be seen at the end of the woods. She was walking slowly with bent head, absorbed in deep meditation.

"*Mordoux! Mordoux!* I must find out who this woman is," said the musketeer.

And without further deliberation he started in pursuit.

As he was going along he asked himself how he could contrive to make her to raise her veil.

"She is not young," he said, "she is a woman of high rank. Devil take me if I don't know that figure!"

As he ran the sound of his spurs and of his boots upon the hard street made a strange clanking. A stroke of fortune on which he had not counted happened to him. The noise alarmed the lady. She thought she was being followed, which was true, and she turned around.

D'Artagnan started as if he had received a charge of small shot in his legs. Then wheeling -

"Madame de Chevreuse!" he murmured.

D'Artagnan did not wish to return home without knowing everything. He asked Father Célestin to find out from the grave-digger who had been buried that morning.

"A poor Franciscan mendicant," replied the latter, "who had not even a dog to love him in the world, and to follow him to his last resting-place."

"If that were the case," thought D'Artagnan, "Aramis would not have been present at his funeral. The Bishop of Vannes is not a dog, so far as devotion is concerned; as for keenness of scent, I do not say."

CHAPTER LIII.

HOW PORTHOS, TRÜCHEN, AND PLANCHET PARTED FRIENDS, THANKS TO D'ARTAGNAN.

The living at Planchet's was good.

Porthos broke a ladder and two cherry-trees, stripped the raspberry bushes, but could not reach the strawberries on account, he said, of his belt.

Trüchen, who had already become quite sociable with the giant, said to him:

"It is not your belt, but your corpulence."

And Porthos, carried away with joy, embraced Trüchen, who gathered him a handful of strawberries and made him eat them out of her hands. D'Artagnan, who arrived in the midst of the proceeding, scolded Porthos for his laziness and silently pitied Planchet.

Porthos breakfasted well, and when he had finished said, looking at Trüchen:

"I could enjoy myself here."

Trüchen smiled; so did Planchet, but not without some embarrassment.

Then D'Artagnan said to Porthos:

"You must not let the delights of Capua make you forget the real object of our visit to Fontainebleau."

"My presentation to the King?"

"Exactly. I am going to make a tour of the town in preparation for that. Do not leave here, I beg of you."

"Oh, no!" exclaimed Porthos.

Planchet looked at D'Artagnan in fear.

"Will you be away long?" he asked.

"No, my friend, and this evening I shall rid you of two very troublesome guests."

"Oh, M. d'Artagnan, can you say —"

"No, your heart is large, but your house is small. Such as it is, with only two acres, it would lodge a king and make him happy, but you were not born a great lord."

"Nor was M. Porthos either," murmured Planchet.

"He has become one, my dear fellow. He has had a hundred thousand livres a year for twenty years, and for fifty years he has had two fists and a backbone which are unrivalled in the beautiful kingdom of France. Porthos is a very great lord beside you, my son, and — I shall say no more. I know you are intelligent."

"No, monsieur, explain."

"Look at your stripped orchard, your empty larder, your broken bedstead, your exhausted cellar. Look at — Madame Trüchen —"

"Oh, Heavens!" said Planchet.

"Porthos, you see, is lord over thirty villages, in which are three hundred sprightly vassals; Porthos is a man of importance."

"Heavens!" repeated Planchet.

"Madame Trüchen is an excellent person. Keep her for yourself, do you understand?"

And he slapped Planchet on the shoulder.

At that moment the grocer saw Trüchen and Porthos, who had gone to an arbor.

Trüchen, with a grace of manner wholly Flemish, was making for Porthos a pair of ear-rings out of double cherries, while Porthos was laughing amorously like Samson with Delilah.

Planchet pressed D'Artagnan's hand and hastened towards the arbor. We will do Porthos the justice to say that he did not move. He probably thought that he was doing nothing wrong. Trüchen did not move either, which upset Planchet. But he had seen enough fashionable people in his shop to put a good face on the matter. He took Porthos by the arm and suggested that they go and look at the horses. Porthos said that he was tired. Planchet proposed that the Baron du Vallon should taste some cordial which he had made himself, and which was without equal. The baron accepted.

Thus it was that throughout the day Planchet occupied his enemy. He sacrificed his cellar to save his pride.

D'Artagnan returned two hours later.

"Everything is arranged," said he. "I saw his Majesty as he was leaving for the chase. The King expects us this evening."

"The King expects me!" cried Porthos, drawing himself up.

And it must be confessed—for a man's heart is an ocean wave—that from that time on Porthos ceased to look at Madame Trüchen with that touching affection which had softened the heart of the woman of Antwerp.

Planchet encouraged these ambitious feelings as much as possible. He related, or rather repeated, all the splendors of the last reign, its battles, its sieges, its ceremonies. He spoke of the luxury of the English, of the three prizes carried off by the three brave comrades, of whom D'Artagnan, the humblest at first, had finally become the leader.

He roused the enthusiasm of Porthos by reminding him of his vanished youth. He boasted as much as he could of the morality of this great lord and of his religious respect for friendship. He was eloquent, he was clever, he charmed Porthos, made Trüchen tremble, and D'Artagnan think.

At six o'clock the musketeer ordered the horses to be saddled and told Porthos to dress. He thanked Planchet for his kind hospitality, whispered a few words about a position that might be obtained for him at court, which immediately raised Planchet in Trüchen's estimation, in which the poor grocer, so good, so generous, and so devoted, had been lowered since the appearance of the two great lords with whom she had compared him. So, however, are women made. They desire

what they have not, and when they have it, disdain what they have sought.

Having rendered this service to his friend Planchet, D'Artagnan said in a low tone to Porthos :

"My friend, you have on your finger a beautiful ring."

"It is worth three hundred pistoles," said Porthos.

"Madame Trüchen will remember you better if you leave her that ring," said D'Artagnan.

Porthos hesitated.

"Do you not think it beautiful enough?" asked the musketeer. "Well, I understand you. A great lord like you does not lodge with an old servant without paying handsomely for his hospitality. But believe me, Planchet is so good-hearted that he will not remember you have a hundred thousand livres a year."

"I have a great mind," said Porthos, flattered by this speech, "to give Madame Trüchen my little farm of twelve acres at Bracieux. That is as good as a ring."

"That is too much, my good Porthos, for the present; keep it for later on."

He took the diamond from his friend's finger and approached Trüchen :

"Madame," said he, "M. le Baron does not know how to ask you to accept out of love for him this little ring. M. du Vallon is one of the most generous, the most discreet men I know. He wanted to offer you a farm which he owns at Bracieux, but I dissuaded him."

"Oh!" said Trüchen, devouring the diamond with her eyes.

"M. le Baron!" cried Planchet, overcome.

"My good friend," stammered Porthos, delighted to have been so well represented by D'Artagnan.

All of these exclamations made a pathetic ending to the day, which might have closed in a ridiculous manner. But D'Artagnan was there, and whenever he had control things ended only according to his will and desire.

They all embraced. Trüchen, restored to herself by the munificence of the baron, realized her place and merely offered a timid and blushing forehead to the great lord with whom the evening before she had been on such familiar terms.

Planchet himself was overcome with humility.

In his generous way Baron Porthos would willingly have

emptied his pockets into the hands of the cook and of Célestin, but D'Artagnan stopped him.

"It is my turn," said he; and he gave one pistole to the woman and two to the man.

There were benedictions which would have rejoiced the heart of Harpagon, and rendered even him lavish.

D'Artagnan made Planchet lead him to the château, and introduced Porthos into his own apartments, which he entered without having been seen by those whom he feared to meet.

CHAPTER LIV.

THE PRESENTATION OF PORTHOS.

THAT same evening, at seven o'clock, the King gave an audience in the grand drawing-room, to an ambassador from the United Provinces. The audience lasted a quarter of an hour. Later his Majesty received those who had been recently presented, and a few ladies whom he honored first with his attention.

In one corner of the room, behind a column, Porthos and D'Artagnan were conversing together, while waiting for their turn.

"Do you know the news?" asked the musketeer of his friend.

"No."

"Well, look."

Porthos stood on tiptoe and saw M. Fouquet in court dress leading Aramis to the King.

"Aramis!" said Porthos.

"Presented by M. Fouquet."

"Ah!" exclaimed Porthos.

"For having fortified Belle-Isle," continued D'Artagnan.

"And I?"

"You? Oh, as I have had the honor of telling you, you are the good-natured, kind-hearted Porthos, and so they begged you to look after Saint-Mandé a little."

"Ah!" repeated Porthos.

"But fortunately I was on the spot," said D'Artagnan, "and presently it will be my turn."

At that moment Fouquet was addressing the King.

"Sire," said he, "I have a favor to ask of your Majesty. M. d'Herblay is not ambitious, but he knows that he can be useful. Your Majesty needs a powerful representative at Rome. Can we not find a cardinal's hat for M. d'Herblay?"

The King started.

"I do not often ask favors of your Majesty," said Fouquet.

"That is a reason," replied the King, who always expressed hesitation by that remark, to which one could make no reply.

Fouquet and Aramis looked at each other.

The King continued:

"M. d'Herblay can serve us in France also. An archbishopric, for instance."

"Sire," objected Fouquet, with a grace that was all his own, "your Majesty overwhelms M. d'Herblay. The archbishopric may, in your Majesty's great kindness, be supplemented by the hat. One does not exclude the other."

The King admired the ready wit and smiled.

"D'Artagnan could not have answered better," said he.

No sooner had he uttered that name than D'Artagnan appeared.

"Did your Majesty call me?" said he.

Aramis and Fouquet drew back a step as if to retire.

"Permit me, Sire," said D'Artagnan quickly, drawing Porthos forward, "to present to your Majesty M. le Baron du Vallon, one of the bravest gentlemen of France."

At sight of Porthos, Aramis grew pale; Fouquet clinched his fists under his ruffles.

D'Artagnan smiled at both, while Porthos bowed, visibly moved by the royal presence.

"Porthos here!" murmured Fouquet into Aramis' ear.

"Hush, there's treachery afoot!" replied the latter.

"Sire," said D'Artagnan, "six years ago I should have presented M. du Vallon to your Majesty. But some men are like stars, they do not move without a train of friends. The Pleiades are never disunited. That is why in order to present M. du Vallon to you I chose the moment when you would see M. d'Herblay by his side."

Aramis almost lost countenance. He looked at D'Artagnan

proudly as though to pick up the gauntlet the latter seemed to have thrown down.

"Ah, these gentlemen are good friends?" asked the King.

"Excellent, Sire, One can answer for the other. Ask M. de Vannes how Belle-Isle was fortified."

Fouquet moved back a step.

"Belle-Isle," said Aramis, coldly, "was fortified by monsieur."

And he indicated Porthos, who bowed a second time.

Louis admired, yet distrusted.

"Yes," said D'Artagnan, "but ask M. le Baron who helped him in his work."

"Aramis," said Porthos frankly, and he pointed to the bishop.

"What the devil does all this mean?" thought the bishop, "and how is this comedy to end?"

"What!" exclaimed the King, "the cardinal — I mean the bishop — is named Aramis?"

"His *nom de guerre*," said D'Artagnan.

"A nickname," said Aramis.

"Away with modesty!" cried D'Artagnan. "Beneath this priest's robes, Sire, is hidden the most brilliant officer, the most intrepid gentleman, the most learned theologian of your kingdom."

Louis looked up.

"And an engineer!" said he, admiring the really admirable physiognomy of Aramis.

"An engineer on occasion," said the latter.

"My companion in the musketeers, Sire," said D'Artagnan, warmly, "the man who more than a hundred times has by his advice supplemented the designs of your father's ministers — M. d'Herblay, in a word, who with M. du Vallon, myself, and M. le Comte de la Fère, who is known to your Majesty, formed that quartette of whom many were talking during the late King's reign and during your minority."

"And who fortified Belle-Isle?" repeated the King, significantly.

Aramis advanced.

"In order to serve the son," said he, "as I served the father."

D'Artagnan looked intently at Aramis while he uttered these words. There was in them such true respect, such hearty devotion, and so much incontestible conviction that even

he, D'Artagnan, the eternal doubter, the infallible, was deceived.

"One does not use such a tone when one is lying," said he.

Louis was impressed.

"In that case," said he to Fouquet, who was anxiously awaiting the result of this test, "the hat is granted. M. d'Herblay, I promise you the first promotion. Thank M. Fouquet for it."

These words were overheard by Colbert, who was completely upset by them. He left the room abruptly.

"And you, M. du Vallon," said the King, "what have you to ask? I like to reward those who served my father."

"Sire," said Porthos. But he was unable to proceed.

"Sire," said D'Artagnan, "this worthy gentleman is overcome by your Majesty's presence, he who so boldly sustained the onslaught and the fire of a thousand enemies. But I know of what he is thinking, — I, who am more accustomed to gaze upon the sun, — and I will tell you his thoughts. He needs nothing, he desires nothing save the happiness of looking upon your Majesty for a quarter of an hour."

"You shall sup with me this evening," said the King, saluting Porthos with a gracious smile.

Porthos became crimson from joy and pride.

The King dismissed him, and D'Artagnan pushed him into the next room after he had embraced him.

"Sit next me at table," said Porthos in his ear.

"Yes, my friend."

"Aramis is vexed with me, is he not?"

"Aramis never loved you any too well. Think that I have just secured for him a cardinal's hat!"

"That is true," said Porthos. "By the way, does the King like one to eat much at his table?"

"It would flatter him," replied D'Artagnan, "for he himself has a royal appetite."

"You enchant me," said Porthos.

CHAPTER LV.

EXPLANATIONS.

ARAMIS cleverly effected a diversion in order to find D'Artagnan and Porthos. He came up to the latter behind the column and, pressing his hand, said :

"So you have escaped from my prison?"

"Do not scold him," said D'Artagnan, "it was I, dear Aramis, who set him free."

"Ah, my friend," replied Aramis, looking at Porthos, "could you not have waited with a little more patience?"

D'Artagnan came to the aid of Porthos, who was already beginning to breathe hard.

"You churchmen," said he to Aramis, "are great politicians. We soldiers come straight to the point. The facts are these: I went to pay Baisemeaux a visit."

Aramis pricked up his ears.

"Wait," said Porthos, "you make me remember that I have a letter from Baisemeaux for you, Aramis."

And Porthos handed the bishop the letter with which we are acquainted.

Aramis begged permission to read it and did so without D'Artagnan's feeling in the slightest degree embarrassed by the fact that he knew the whole of its contents. Moreover Aramis had such good control of his face that D'Artagnan admired him more than ever. The letter read, Aramis put it into his pocket in a perfectly calm manner.

"You were saying, my dear captain," said he.

"I was saying," replied the musketeer, "that I had gone to pay Baisemeaux a visit in his Majesty's service."

"His Majesty's service?" said Aramis.

"Yes," said D'Artagnan, "and naturally we spoke of you and our friends. I must say that Baisemeaux received me coldly, so I left. As I was leaving a soldier approached me and said — he probably recognized me in spite of my citizen's clothes — 'Captain, will you be kind enough to read the name on this letter?' And I read, 'To M. du Vallon, Saint-Mandé, At M. Fouquet's.' '*Pardieu*,' said I to myself, 'Porthos has not returned as I thought to Pierrefonds or Belle-Isle, but is at Saint-Mandé at M. Fouquet's. M. Fouquet is not at Saint-

Mandé, so Porthos is alone or with Aramis. Let us go to see Porthos.' So I went."

"Very good!" said Aramis, thoughtfully.

"You did not tell me that," said Porthos.

"I did not have time, my friend."

"And you brought Porthos to Fontainebleau?"

"To Planchet's."

"Does Planchet live at Fontainebleau?" asked Aramis.

"Yes, near the cemetery," said Porthos, thoughtlessly.

"Near the cemetery?" asked Aramis, suspiciously.

"Come," thought the musketeer, "since there is to be a squabble, let us take advantage of it."

"Yes, near the cemetery," said Porthos. "Planchet is certainly a good fellow and he makes delicious preserves, but some of his windows look out on the cemetery. That is mournful! This morning —"

"This morning?" said Aramis, more and more agitated.

D'Artagnan turned his back and walked to the window, where he began to play a march on one of the panes of glass.

"This morning," continued Porthos, "we saw a man buried there."

"Ah!"

"It was depressing. I would not live in a house from which I was constantly seeing funerals, but D'Artagnan, on the contrary, seems to like it very much."

"Ah, so D'Artagnan saw it?"

"He did not see it, he devoured it with his eyes."

Aramis gave a start and turned to look at the musketeer; but the latter was already in deep conversation with Saint-Aignan.

Aramis continued to question Porthos, and when he had squeezed all the juice from that gigantic lemon he threw away the rind.

Turning to his friend D'Artagnan, and clapping him on the shoulder:

"Friend," said he, when Saint-Aignan had gone, for the King's supper had been announced.

"Dear friend," replied D'Artagnan.

"The rest of us do not sup with the King."

"No, but I do."

"Can you spare me ten minutes?"

"Twenty. His Majesty will require that time to get seated."

"Where shall we talk?"

"Why, here, on these seats. The King has gone and we can sit down. The room is empty."

"Come, then."

They sat down. Aramis took one of D'Artagnan's hands.

"Tell me, my dear friend," said he, "whether you have made Porthos distrust me a little."

"I have, but not as you think. I saw that Porthos was bored to death and I wished by presenting him to the King to do for him and for you what you would never do for yourselves."

"What?"

"Sing your praises."

"You did it nobly. Thank you."

"And I brought the cardinal's hat, which was slipping away, a little nearer."

"I admit that," said Aramis, with a strange smile. "You are indeed the only man who makes his friends' fortunes."

"You see, then, that I acted only to make that of Porthos."

"I had undertaken that, but your arm is longer than ours."

It was D'Artagnan's turn to smile.

"Come," said Aramis, "we owe each other the truth. Do you still love me, my dear D'Artagnan?"

"The same as ever," replied D'Artagnan, without compromising himself by this answer.

"In that case, thanks. And now let us be perfectly frank," said Aramis. "You went to Belle-Isle for the King?"

"*Pardieu!*"

"You wished to deprive us of the pleasure of offering Belle-Isle completely fortified to the King?"

"But, my friend, in order to deprive you of that pleasure, I should have had first to be informed of your intentions."

"Did you come to Belle-Isle without knowing anything?"

"About you, yes. How the devil do you suppose I should know that Aramis had become enough of an engineer to fortify like Polybius or Archimedes?"

"That is true, yet you knew something was up."

"Oh, yes."

"And Porthos, too?"

"My dear fellow, I did not suspect that Aramis was an

engineer; I did not imagine that Porthos had become one. There is a Latin saying: 'One becomes an orator, one is born a poet,' but it has never been said — 'One is born a Porthos and becomes an engineer.'"

"You are always delightfully witty," said Aramis, coldly, "but let me go on."

"Do so."

"When you discovered our secret you hastened to communicate it to the King?"

"I made all the more haste, my friend, since I saw that you were in such haste. When a man weighing two hundred and fifty-eight pounds, as Porthos does, rides post haste; when a gouty prelate — I beg your pardon, but you told me so yourself — rides like the wind, I suppose that these two friends, who did not trouble to notify me, had matters of the greatest importance to hide from me. And so, faith, I made as much haste as my leanness and the absence from gout would allow."

"My dear friend, did it not occur to you that you might be rendering Porthos and me a sad service?"

"It did occur to me. But you and Porthos made me play a very absurd part at Belle-Isle."

"Pardon me," said Aramis.

"Excuse me," said D'Artagnan.

"So that," continued Aramis, "you now know everything?"

"Faith, no."

"You know that I had to tell M. Fouquet at once in order that he might inform the King before you did?"

"That is obscure."

"Why, no. M. Fouquet has enemies, you will admit."

"Oh, yes."

"And one in particular."

"A dangerous one?"

"Mortally so. Well, in order to counteract the influence of this enemy M. Fouquet had to give the King proof of great devotion and great sacrifice. He surprised his Majesty by offering him Belle-Isle. Had you reached Paris first the surprise would have been spoiled. We should have seemed to yield through fear."

"I understand."

"That is the whole mystery," said Aramis, satisfied that he had convinced the musketeer.

"Only," said the latter, "it would have been simpler to have taken me aside at Belle-Isle and said to me, 'My dear friend, we have been fortifying Belle-Isle-en-Mer in order to offer it to the King. Do us the favor to tell us for whom you are acting. Are you a friend of M. Colbert or of M. Fouquet?' Perhaps I should not have answered, but you might have added, 'Are you my friend?' And I should have answered 'Yes.'"

Aramis bent his head.

"In that way," continued D'Artagnan, "you would have silenced me, and I should have said to the King, 'Sire, M. Fouquet is fortifying Belle-Isle, and doing it well, too. But here is a note which the Governor of Belle-Isle gave me for your Majesty,' or 'M. Fouquet is about to pay you a visit in regard to his intentions.' I should not have been playing a foolish part, you would have had your surprise, and we should not have needed to look askance at each other when we met."

"While to-day," said Aramis, "you have acted wholly as a friend of M. Colbert. Are you his friend?"

"Faith, no!" said the captain. "M. Colbert is a mean fellow, and I hate him as I hated Mazarin, but without fearing him."

"Well," said Aramis, "so far as I am concerned, I love M. Fouquet, and I am working wholly for him. You know my position. I have no means. M. Fouquet has had me given several benefits and a bishopric. M. Fouquet has often come to my aid, like the gallant man that he is, and I know the world well enough to appreciate a kindness; so M. Fouquet has won my heart, and I am at his service."

"Nothing could be better. You have a good master in him." Aramis compressed his lips.

"The best, I think, that any one could possibly have."

Then he paused.

D'Artagnan was careful not to interrupt him.

"You know, probably, how Porthos was mixed up in all of this?"

"No," said D'Artagnan. "I am curious, it is true, but I never question a friend who wishes to keep anything from me."

"I will tell you."

"It is not worth the trouble if the confidence is to bind me."

"Oh, do not be afraid; I love Porthos better than any one,

because he is simple and good; Porthos is straightforward. Since I have become a bishop I have looked for simple natures, which make me love truth and hate intrigue."

D'Artagnan stroked his mustache.

"I saw and cultivated Porthos. He was idle. Being with him recalled my earlier and better days without leading me into any wrong-doing at present. I summoned Porthos to Vannes. M. Fouquet, who loves me, having heard that Porthos cared for me, promised him increase of rank at the earliest promotion. That is the whole secret."

"I shall not take advantage of it," said D'Artagnan.

"I know that, my dear friend. No one has a finer sense of honor than you."

"I flatter myself that such is the case, Aramis."

"And now —" The prelate looked searchingly at his friend. "And now let us talk about ourselves; do you want to become one of M. Fouquet's friends? Do not interrupt me until you know what that means."

"I am all attention."

"Do you wish to become a marshal of France, peer, duke, and the possessor of a duchy worth a million?"

"But, my friend," said D'Artagnan, "what must I do to get all that?"

"Belong to M. Fouquet."

"But I belong to the King, my dear friend."

"Not exclusively, I suppose."

"Oh, a D'Artagnan is only one person."

"You have, I presume, ambitions, like every great man?"

"Why, yes."

"Well?"

"Well, I desire to be a marshal of France; but the King will make me marshal, duke, peer. The King will do all that for me."

Aramis fixed his clear eyes upon D'Artagnan.

"Is not the King master?" said D'Artagnan.

"No one disputes that; but Louis XIII. was master also."

"Oh! but, my dear friend, between Richelieu and Louis XIII. there was no D'Artagnan," said the musketeer, quickly.

"There are many stumbling-blocks around a king," said Aramis.

"Not for the King."

"Probably not; but —"

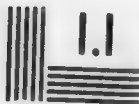


MICROCOPY RESOLUTION TEST CHART

(ANSI and ISO TEST CHART No. 2)



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"Wait, Aramis. I see that every one is thinking of himself and never of this poor prince. I will sustain myself by sustaining him."

"And ingratitude?"

"Weak people fear that."

"You are sure of yourself?"

"I think so."

"But the King may have no further need of you."

"On the contrary, I think he will have more need than ever of me; and, my dear fellow, if it were necessary to arrest a new Condé, how would it be done? By this! By this alone in France!"

And D'Artagnan struck his sword.

"You are right," said Aramis, growing pale.

And he rose and grasped D'Artagnan by the hand.

"There is the last call for supper," said the captain of the musketeers. "You will permit —"

Aramis threw his arm around the musketeer's neck, and said:

"A friend like you is the brightest jewel in the royal crown."

Then they separated.

"I was right," thought D'Artagnan; "there is something afoot."

"We must hasten to set fire to the powder," said Aramis, "for D'Artagnan has discovered the fuse."

CHAPTER LVI.

MADAME AND DE GUICHE.

WE have seen how the Comte de Guiche left the room the day that Louis XIV. had so gallantly offered to La Vallière the marvellous bracelets won in the lottery. The count walked for a time outside the palace, his mind beset by a thousand suspicions and anxieties. Then he stopped on the terrace opposite the grove of trees, and watched for Madame's departure.

A full half-hour passed. Alone as he was at that moment, the count could not have had many diverting ideas.

He drew his tablets from his pocket, and after much hesitation wrote these words:

"MADAME: I beg you to grant me a moment's conversation. Do not be alarmed at this request, which signifies nothing beyond the deep respect with which I am," etc., etc.

He had signed and folded this strange love-letter when he observed several ladies leaving the château, then several men: finally almost the Queen's entire circle.

He saw La Vallière herself; and then saw Montalais talking with Malicorne. He saw the very last of the guests who but a short time before had filled the apartments of the queen mother.

Madame had not passed. And yet in order to return to her rooms she would have to cross this court-yard which De Guiche could see from the terrace.

At last he saw her leave attended by two pages bearing torches. She walked quickly, and on reaching her door said:

"Pages, have some one find M. de Guiche. He has to give me an account of a mission. If he is free beg him to come to me."

De Guiche remained silent, hidden in the shade; but as soon as Madame had disappeared he darted from the terrace down the steps and assumed the most indifferent air, as the pages, who were already hurrying to his rooms, met him.

"Ah, Madame is seeking for me," said he to himself, quite overcome. And he tightened his hold on the now useless note.

"M. le Comte," said one of the pages on perceiving him, "we are fortunate in meeting you."

"Why so, messieurs?"

"An order from Madame."

"From Madame?" said De Guiche, looking surprised.

"Yes, M. le Comte. Her royal Highness is asking for you. She says you are to give an account of some mission. Are you at liberty?"

"I am wholly at her royal Highness's orders."

"Be kind enough to follow us, then."

Arrived at the princess's apartments, De Guiche found her pale and agitated.

At the door stood Montalais, anxious at what was going on in the mind of her mistress.

De Guiche appeared.

"Ah, it is you, M. de Guiche," said Madame; "enter, I beg. Mademoiselle de Montalais, you are no longer needed."

Montalais, more puzzled than ever, courtesied and withdrew. The two others were left alone.

The count had every advantage; it was Madame who had summoned him to an interview. But how could he best use this advantage? Madame was so whimsical and so changeable.

She soon showed this, for suddenly opening the conversation she said:

"Well, have you nothing to say to me?"

He imagined she must have guessed his thought; he fancied — those in love are so made, being as credulous and as blind as poets or prophets — that she knew his desire to see her and the reason for this desire.

"Yes, Madame," said he, "and I think it very strange."

"You mean the affair of the bracelets?" she cried quickly.

"Yes, Madame."

"You think the King in love, do you?"

De Guiche looked long at her. Her eyes fell before that glance, which pierced to her very heart.

"I think," said he, "that the King may have had an idea of annoying some one; otherwise he would not seem so much in earnest as he does; he would not risk compromising a young girl's heart, hitherto untouched."

"Such a bold creature!" said the princess, haughtily.

"I can assure your royal Highness," said De Guiche, with respectful firmness, "that Mademoiselle de la Vallière is loved by a man who must be respected, for he is a gentleman."

"You mean Bragelonne?"

"My friend, yes, Madame."

"Well, even though he is your friend, what difference does that make to the King?"

"The King knows that Bragelonne is affianced to Mademoiselle de la Vallière, and as Raoul has served the King valiantly, his Majesty will not do him an irreparable injury."

Madame burst into a laugh, which produced an unfortunate impression upon De Guiche.

"I repeat, Madame, I do not believe the King is in love with La Vallière, and the proof that I do not believe in it lies in the fact that I was about to ask you whose pride his Majesty wishes to wound. You who are well acquainted with the court can help me in finding this out more positively, since it is said

everywhere that your royal Highness is on intimate terms with the King."

Madame bit her lips, and in default of any good reasons she changed the subject.

"Prove to me," she said, fixing on him one of those looks in which her whole soul seemed to lie bare, "that you were going to question me when I sent for you."

De Guiche gravely drew out from his tablets what he had written and showed it to her.

"Sympathy," said she.

"Yes," said the count, with indescribable tenderness, "sympathy. I have explained to you how and why I sought you, but you, Madame, have still to tell why you sent for me."

"True."

She hesitated.

"These bracelets will drive me to distraction," she said suddenly.

"You expected the King to offer them to you?" said De Guiche.

"Why not?"

"But before you, Madame, his sister-in-law, did not the King have the Queen to consider?"

"Before La Vallière," cried the princess, stung to the quick, "did he not have me? Did he not have the entire court?"

"I assure you, Madame," said the count, respectfully, "that if any one were to hear you speak so or to see your red eyes and, God forgive me, the tears which tremble on your lashes, every one would say that your royal Highness is jealous."

"Jealous?" said the princess haughtily, "jealous of La Vallière?"

She expected to see De Guiche bow before her proud and haughty tone, but he answered bravely:

"Yes, Madame, jealous of La Vallière."

"Am I to suppose, monsieur," she stammered, "that you wish to insult me?"

"I think not, Madame," replied the count, somewhat agitated, but determined to calm that stormy anger.

"Leave me!" said the princess, exasperated. De Guiche's calmness and silent respect turned her pride to rage.

De Guiche stepped back, bowed slowly, grew as white as his cuffs, and in a slightly altered voice, said:

"It was hardly worth my trouble to have hurried here in order to submit to this disgrace!" And he hastily turned away.

He had not taken five steps before Madame darted after him like a tigress, seized him by the sleeve, and turning him around said, trembling with fury :

"The respect you pretend to feel is more insulting than the insult. Come, insult me, but at least speak!"

"Madame," said the count, gently drawing his sword, "pierce me to the heart, but do not kill me by degrees."

At the look he fixed on her — a look full of love, resolution, and even despair — she realized that the man outwardly so calm would pass the sword through his own breast if she added another word.

She snatched the sword from his hands, and pressing his arm with a passion which might have passed for tenderness, said :

"Comte, bear with me! You see how I am suffering, yet you have no pity."

Tears, the climax of this attack, stifled her. Seeing her cry, De Guiche took her in his arms and carried her to a chair. In another moment she would have suffocated.

"Why," murmured he on his knees, "why do you not tell me your troubles? Do you love any one? Tell me. It will kill me, but not before I shall have comforted, consoled, and even served you."

"Oh, do you love me as much as that?" said she, conquered.

"I love you as much as that, Madame."

She placed both her hands in his.

"I do love some one," said she, so low that she could scarcely be heard.

But he heard.

"Is it the King?" he asked.

She shook her head gently, and her smile was like a rent in the clouds through which, after a storm, one seems to see heaven.

"But," she added, "there are other passions in a high-born heart. Love is poetry, but the life of the heart is pride. Comte, I was born on a throne. I am proud and jealous of my rank. Why does the King gather around him such unworthy objects?"

"Ah! will you again," said the count, "act unjustly towards the girl who is to be my friend's wife!"

"Are you simple enough to think that?"

"If I did not believe it," said he, very pale, "Bragelonne should hear of it to-morrow; yes, if I thought that that poor La Vallière had forgotten her vows to Raoul — but, no, it would be cowardly to betray a woman's secret; it would be criminal to disturb a friend's peace of mind."

"You think," said the princess, with a wild burst of laughter, "that ignorance is bliss?"

"Yes," he replied.

"Prove it, then," said she, quickly.

"That is easily done, Madame. It is said throughout the court that the King loves you and that you love the King."

"Well," said she, breathing with difficulty.

"Well, suppose that Raoul, my friend, had come to me and said: 'Yes, the King loves Madame, and has touched her heart,' I would perhaps have killed Raoul."

"It would have been necessary," said the princess, with the obstinacy of a woman who feels her position unassailable, "for M. de Bragelonne to have had proofs before speaking to you in that way."

"However, such is the case," replied De Guiche, sighing, "that not having been warned I did not go deeply into the matter, and to-day my ignorance has saved my life."

"So you carry egoism and coldness so far," said Madame, "that you would let this unhappy young man continue to love La Vallière?"

"Until the day when La Vallière was proved guilty to me."

"But the bracelets?"

"Well, Madame, since you yourself expected to receive them from the King, what can I say?"

The argument was a forcible one; the princess was overwhelmed by it and from that moment she was silenced. But as her soul was noble, as her mind was intelligent, she realized De Guiche's delicacy. She saw clearly that in his heart he suspected that the King loved La Vallière, and that notwithstanding this he did not wish to resort to the common expedient of ruining a rival in the eyes of a woman by giving the latter the assurance and certainty that this rival was courting another woman.

She guessed that he suspected La Vallière, and that in order

to give himself time to change his opinions, in order not to ruin the girl forever, he reserved for himself a direct line of conduct and refrained from further plain speaking.

In a word, she read all her lover's true greatness, all his generosity of heart, and felt her own heart warmed by contact with so pure a love. In spite of his fear of displeasing her, De Guiche, by remaining a man of real worth and of devotion, became a hero, and reduced her to the position of a jealous, small-minded woman. For this she loved him so tenderly that she could not help giving him a proof of her affection.

"How many words have been wasted," said she, taking his hand, "suspicions, anxieties, doubts, and griefs! I think we have uttered them all."

"Alas, yes, Madame!"

"Drive them from your heart, as I will from mine, count. Whether La Vallière does or does not love the King, or whether the King does or does not love La Vallière, let us, from this moment, make a distinction in the two parts we have to play. You open your eyes so wide that I am sure you do not understand me."

"You are so impetuous, Madame, that I tremble always for fear of displeasing you."

"See how he trembles, poor fellow!" said she, with the most charming playfulness. "Yes, monsieur, I have two rôles to play. I am the sister of the King, and the sister-in-law of his wife. So ought I not to take an interest in these domestic intrigues? Give me your opinion."

"As little as possible, Madame."

"Agreed; but it is a question of dignity; moreover, I am the wife of Monsieur."

De Guiche sighed.

"Which," said she, tenderly, "ought to make you treat me always with the greatest respect."

"Oh!" cried he, falling at her feet, which he kissed as if they were those of a divinity.

"And," she murmured, "I believe that I have still another rôle to play, one which I had forgotten."

"What is it?"

"I am a woman," said she, in a lower tone, "and I love."

He arose. She opened her arms. Their lips met.

A footstep was heard behind the tapestry. Montalais appeared.

"What is it, mademoiselle?" said Madame.

"They are looking for M. de Guiche," replied Montalais, who was just in time to see the confusion of the actors of these four rôles; for De Guiche had consistently and heroically played his.

CHAPTER LVII.

MONTALAIS AND MALICORNE.

MONTALAIS was right. M. de Guiche, summoned in every direction, was greatly exposed by the multiplicities of business to the danger of not presenting himself anywhere.

So, such is the strength of weak situations, Madame, in spite of her wounded pride and her secret anger, could not for the time being at least reproach Montalais for having so boldly violated the quasi-royal order by which she had been dismissed.

De Guiche too lost his head, or, rather, had lost it before her arrival, for scarcely had he heard the young girl's voice when, without taking leave of Madame as the most ordinary politeness requires even between equals, he fled from her with throbbing heart and head on fire, leaving the princess with one hand raised bidding him adieu. De Guiche could say, as Chérubin said a hundred years later, that he bore eternal happiness on his lips.

Montalais, therefore, found the two lovers greatly agitated: the one who fled was agitated, the one who remained was agitated. The young girl threw a questioning glance around her and murmured:

"This time I know as much as the most curious woman could desire to know."

Madame was so embarrassed by the inquisitive look that, as if she had heard Montalais' aside, she did not say a single word to her maid of honor, but with lowered eyes entered her sleeping-room.

Seeing this, Montalais listened.

She heard Madame lock her door.

From that moment she knew that the evening was her own; and making behind the door which had just been closed a rather disrespectful courtesy as much as to say "Good-night.

princess," she went down the stairs to find Malicorne who was engaged for the moment in watching a courier covered with dust who had just left De Guiche's apartments.

Montalais understood that Malicorne was engaged in a matter of some importance; she let him look and stretch his neck, and when Malicorne had resumed his natural position she asked:

"Well, anything new?"

"M. de Guiche is in love with Madame."

"Fine news! I know something more recent."

"What do you know?"

"That Madame is in love with M. de Guiche."

"The one is the result of the other."

"Not always, my fine sir."

"Is that remark meant for me?"

"Present company is always excepted."

"Thanks," said Malicorne. "And in the other direction?" he continued.

"The King, this evening, after the lottery wished to see Mademoiselle de la Vallière."

"Well, and did he see her?"

"No."

"No?"

"The door was closed."

"So that —"

"So that the King returned looking like a robber who has forgotten his crowbar."

"Good."

"And in the third place?" asked Montalais.

"The courier who has just arrived for M. de Guiche was sent by M. de Bragelonne."

"Good!" said Montalais, clapping her hands.

"Why good?"

"Because there is work for us. If we become bored now, something evil will happen."

"We must divide the work," said Malicorne, "in order to avoid confusion."

"Nothing is easier," replied Montalais. "Three intrigues, well nursed and carefully managed, will produce, one with another, at the least three notes a day."

"Oh!" exclaimed Malicorne, shrugging his shoulders; "you cannot mean what you say, my dear; three notes a day may do

for ordinary sentiments. A musketeer on duty, a young girl in a convent, may exchange daily notes from the top of a ladder or through a hole in the wall. A note contains all the poetry of their poor little hearts. But with us — oh, how little you know royal love-making!"

"Well, finish," said Montalais, impatiently. "Some one may come."

"Finish! I have only begun. I have still three points."

"Really, he will be the death of me, with his Flemish indifference," said Montalais.

"And you will drive me mad with your Italian vivacity. I was going to say that our lovers will be writing volumes to each other. But what are you driving at?"

"At this: Not one of our ladies can keep the letters she receives."

"Very likely not."

"M. de Guiche will not dare to keep his either."

"That is probable."

"Well, I shall take care of all that."

"That is just what is impossible," said Malicorne.

"Why so?"

"Because you are not your own mistress; your room is La Vallière's as much as yours; people are in the habit of visiting and searching the room of a maid of honor. Because I am very much afraid of the Queen, who is as jealous as a Spaniard; of the queen mother, who is as jealous as two Spaniards; and finally of Madame, who is as jealous as ten Spaniards."

"You forget some one else."

"Who?"

"Monsieur."

"I was speaking only of the women. Let us add them up, then. Monsieur, number one."

"De Guiche, number two."

"The Vicomte de Bragelonne, number three."

"The King, number four."

"The King?"

"Certainly, the King, who not only will be more jealous, but more powerful than all the rest. Ah, my dear!"

"Well?"

"Into what a wasp's nest have you thrust yourself!"

"Not yet far enough, if you will follow me into it."

"Certainly I will follow you, and yet —"

"And yet?"

"While there is still time I think it would be wise to turn back."

"And I, on the contrary, think that the wisest course is to put ourselves at once at the head of all these intrigues."

"You cannot do it."

"With you I could manage ten. I am in my element, you see. I was born to live at court as a salamander is born to live in the fire."

"Your comparison does not in the least reassure me, my dear friend. I have heard it said by scholars that in the first place there are no salamanders; that if there had been any they would have been baked or roasted on leaving the fire."

"Your scholars may be very wise so far as salamanders are concerned, but they would never tell you what I can tell you; namely, that Aure de Montalais is destined before one month has passed to become the first diplomatist at the court of France."

"Be it so, but on condition that I shall be the second."

"Agreed; an offensive and defensive alliance."

"Only be careful of my letters."

"I will give them to you as they are given to me."

"What shall we tell the King about Madame?"

"That Madame is still in love with him."

"What shall we tell Madame about the King?"

"That she would be very wrong not to humor him."

"What shall we say to La Vallière about Madame?"

"Anything we wish, for La Vallière is in our power."

"How so?"

"Doubly."

"But how?"

"In the first place through the Vicomte de Bragelonne."

"Explain yourself."

"You are not forgetting, I hope, that M. de Bragelonne has written many letters to Mademoiselle de la Vallière?"

"I am forgetting nothing."

"It was I who received and hid these letters."

"And consequently it is you who have them?"

"Yes."

"Where? Here?"

"Oh, no, at Blois. In the little room you know."

"Dear little room! Precious little room! Ante-chamber of the palace in which you shall some day live. But pardon me, you say that all these letters are in that little room?"

"Yes."

"Did you not put them in a box?"

"Certainly. In the same box in which I put those I received from you, and in which I placed mine when your business or pleasure prevented you from keeping your appointments."

"Ah, very good!" said Malicorne.

"Why this satisfaction of yours?"

"Because I foresee the possibility of not having to go to Blois for the letters. I have them here."

"You brought the box?"

"It was dear to me, coming from you."

"Take care of it, then, for it contains original manuscripts that will be of great value by and by."

"I know that, *parbleu!* And that is just why I am laughing, and with all my heart, too."

"And now a final word."

"Why final?"

"Do we need auxiliaries?"

"None."

"Valets or maid servants?"

"Bad! Detestable! You will give the letters; you will receive them. Oh, there must be no pride about it; otherwise M. Malicorne and Mademoiselle Aure not attending to their own affairs themselves will have to make up their minds to see them carried out by others."

"You are right. But what is going on at M. de Guiche's?"

"Nothing. He is opening his window."

"Let us go."

And both disappeared, the compact being settled.

The window just opened was indeed that of M. de Guiche's room; but it was not — as the uninitiated might suppose — alone in order to try to catch a glimpse of Madame through his curtains that he seated himself at the window, for his thoughts were not wholly given up to her.

As we have said, he had just received a courier sent by Bragelonne, who had written to De Guiche. The latter had read and re-read the letter, which had produced a deep impression on him.

"Strange, strange," he murmured, "by what powerful means destiny leads men to their fates!"

And leaving the window to approach the light, for a third time he read the letter, the lines of which seemed to burn into his memory as into his eyes.

"CALAIS.

"MY DEAR COUNT: I found M. de Wardes at Calais: he had been seriously wounded in an affair with M. de Buckingham. De Wardes, as you know, is a brave man, but malicious and wicked.

"He conversed with me about you, for whom he says he has a deep regard, and about Madame, whom he thinks beautiful and amiable. He has guessed your love for a certain person. He also talked to me about the person whom I love, and showed the greatest interest, expressing a deep pity for me. He added, however, hints that at first alarmed, but which I finally looked upon as the outcome of his usual love of mystery.

"These are the facts:

"He had received news of the court. You will understand that it was only through M. de Lorraine.

"They say, so runs the report, that 'a change has taken place in the King's affections.' You know whom that concerns.

"Next, the report continues, 'there is talk of a maid of honor, who is the subject of gossip.'

"These vague rumors have not allowed me to sleep. Since yesterday I have been regretting that my weakness of character has, in spite of a certain obstinacy, left me unable to reply to these insinuations.

"In a word, M. de Wardes was leaving for Paris and I did not delay his departure by explanations. It seemed to me hard, I admit, to hold to account a man whose wounds were scarcely healed.

"In short, he travelled by easy stages in order to be present, he said, at a curious spectacle which the court cannot fail to offer within a short time.

"He added to these words a few congratulations and condolences. I could not understand the first any better than the second. I was bewildered by my thoughts and by a distrust of this man, a distrust which you know better than any one else, that I have never been able to overcome.

"But once he was gone my mind became clearer. It is impossible for a man of De Wardes' character not to have

insinuated some of his own malice into the conversation we had together. It is not impossible, therefore, that in the mysterious hints De Wardes gave me there may be a strange significance which I might apply to myself or to you know whom.

"Compelled as I was by the King's command to leave at once, it did not occur to me to follow up M. de Wardes to ask for an explanation of his reticence; but I have dispatched a courier to you with this letter which will explain all my suspicions. You are as myself. I have thought; you will act.

"M. de Wardes will arrive shortly. Try to find out what he meant, if you do not already know. Moreover, M. de Wardes pretended that M. de Buckingham had left Paris on the best of terms with Madame. This was an affair which would have made me draw my sword at once had it not been for the necessity of attending to the King's commission before entering into any quarrel.

"Burn this letter which Olivain will give you. Whatever he says you may rely on.

"Have the kindness, my dear count, to recall me to the remembrance of Mademoiselle de la Vallière, whose hand I kiss most respectfully.

"Yours devotedly,

"VICOMTE DE BRAGELONNE.

"P.S.—If anything serious should happen,—we should be prepared in every way, my dear friend,—dispatch a courier to me with the single word 'Come' and I will be in Paris thirty-six hours after the receipt of your letter."

De Guiche sighed, folded the letter a third time, and, instead of burning it, as Raoul had asked him to do, put it into his pocket. He needed to read it over and over again.

"What distress, and yet what confidence!" murmured the count. "Raoul's whole soul is in this letter. He has forgotten the Comte de la Fère, and speaks of his respect for Louise. He warns me on my own account, and entreats me on his. Ah!" continued De Guiche, with a threatening gesture, "you are interfering in my affairs, M. de Wardes. Well, I shall look into yours. As for you, poor Raoul, your heart has entrusted itself to me; fear not but that I shall watch over it."

With this promise De Guiche begged Malicorne to come to him at once if possible. Malicorne came in response to the request, with an alacrity which was the first fruit of his conversation with Montalais.

De Guiche, who thought his motives were unknown, questioned Malicorne; but the latter, who was working in the dark, guessed what his questioner believed concealed.

The result was that after a quarter of an hour's conversation, during which De Guiche thought he had discovered the whole truth about La Vallière and the King, he had learned absolutely nothing beyond what he had seen with his own eyes; while Malicorne had learned or guessed that Raoul felt some distrust, and that De Guiche was going to watch over the treasure of the Hesperides.

Malicorne accepted the office of dragon.

De Guiche, believing he had done everything possible for his friend, had no further thought except for himself.

The following evening De Wardes' return and first appearance before the King were announced. After that visit the convalescent was to go to Monsieur's.

De Guiche was there before the time for De Wardes' visit.

CHAPTER LVIII

HOW DE WARDES WAS RECEIVED AT COURT.

MONSIEUR had received De Wardes with that marked favor which a frivolous mind, anxious for novelty, bestows on every newcomer.

De Wardes, who, as a matter of fact, had not been seen for a month, was fresh fruit. To treat him with kindness was, in the first place, a sign of infidelity to old friends; and this always has its charm. Furthermore, it was a reparation he could make De Wardes. Monsieur, therefore, treated him with especial attention.

The Chevalier de Lorraine, who greatly feared this rival, but who respected a nature in every way resembling his own, though more courageous, received De Wardes with greater kindness even than Monsieur had shown.

De Guiche, as we have said, was there, but kept somewhat apart, waiting patiently until all these greetings were over.

De Wardes, while speaking to the others and to Monsieur, had not lost sight of De Guiche, who he felt instinctively was there on his account. So as soon as he had finished with the others he approached De Guiche. They exchanged the most courteous compliments, after which De Wardes returned to Monsieur and to the other gentlemen.

In the midst of all these congratulations Madame was announced. She had heard of the arrival of De Wardes, and knowing all the details of his journey and of his duel with Buckingham, she was not sorry to be present at the first remarks made by one whom she knew to be her enemy. Two or three ladies of honor were with her.

De Wardes saluted Madame most graciously, and in order to begin hostilities announced first of all, that he could give the friends of M. de Buckingham news of him. This was a direct answer to the coldness with which Madame had received him.

The attack was vigorous, and Madame felt the blow, although she did not appear to notice it. She glanced rapidly at Monsieur and De Guiche. The former colored, De Guiche turned pale.

Madame alone did not change countenance, but realizing how many unpleasant things her enemy could awaken in the two persons who were listening to him, she smilingly bent forward towards the traveller. The traveller was speaking of other matters.

Madame was brave, imprudent, even; all retreat would invite an attack. After the first tightening of heart she returned to the charge.

"Have you suffered much from your wounds, M. de Wardes?" she asked, "for we have heard that you had the misfortune to be wounded."

It was De Wardes' turn to start. He compressed his lips.

"No, Madame," said he, "scarcely at all."

"And yet in this horrible heat —"

"The sea air is fresh, Madame, and then I had one consolation."

"Oh, so much the better! And what was that?"

"Knowing that my adversary was suffering even more than I."

"Ah, he was wounded more seriously than you? I did not know that," said the princess, with utter indifference.

"Oh, Madame, you are mistaken, or rather you pretend to misunderstand my words. I did not say that physically he had suffered more than I—it was his feelings that were affected."

De Guiche understood from what quarter the storm was coming; he ventured to make Madame a sign begging her to give up the struggle.

But without replying to De Guiche, without apparently seeing him, she said, still smiling:

"What! M. de Buckingham's feelings affected? I did not know until now that a wound of the heart could be healed."

"Alas, Madame," replied De Wardes, graciously, "women believe that, and that is what makes them superior to us in confidence."

"My love, you do not understand," said the prince, impatiently. "M. de Wardes means that the Duke of Buckingham's feelings had been hurt by something besides a sword."

"Well," said Madame, "it is a jest of M. de Wardes', only I wish M. de Buckingham could enjoy it. Really, it is a great pity that he is not here, M. de Wardes."

A flash passed from the young man's eyes.

"Oh," said he, between set teeth, "I wish so too."

De Guiche did not move. Madame seemed to expect him to come to her assistance. Monsieur hesitated. The Chevalier de Lorraine advanced and spoke.

"Madame," said he, "De Wardes knows well enough that for a Buckingham's heart to be touched is nothing new, and what he has said has already been seen."

"Instead of an ally, two enemies," murmured Madame, "two enemies desperate and in league with each other," and she changed the conversation.

To change the conversation is, as every one knows, a right of princes, which etiquette requires all to respect. The rest of the conversation was moderate, the principal actors having finished their parts. Madame withdrew early, and Monsieur, who wished to question her, offered her his hand.

The chevalier was greatly afraid that an understanding might take place between husband and wife, if they were suffered to remain quietly together. He therefore made his way to Monsieur's apartments to surprise him on his return, and destroy in a few words all the good impressions Madame might have been able to sow in his heart.

De Guiche took a step towards De Wardes, who was surrounded by quite a crowd. In this way he indicated his desire to speak with him. By his eyes and a nod of his head De Wardes showed that he understood. For strangers this was only a friendly sign. De Guiche could therefore turn away and wait.

He did not wait long. De Wardes, freed from his questioners, approached, and after a fresh salutation they walked away side by side.

"You have made a good impression, my dear De Wardes," said the count.

"Excellent, as you see."

"And your spirits are still gay?"

"Gayer than ever."

"That is very fortunate."

"What would you have? Everything is so ridiculous in this world, and so absurd."

"You are right."

"You are of my opinion, then?"

"I should think so. And you bring us news?"

"No, faith, I have come here to get some."

"But you must have seen people at Boulogne; one of our friends, and that not very long ago."

"People? One of our friends?"

"You have a short memory."

"Ah, that is true. You mean Bragelonne?"

"Yes."

"Who was going to execute a mission to King Charles II.?"

"That was it. Well, did he tell you or did you not tell him —?"

"I do not know what I told him, I must confess, but I know what I did not tell him."

De Wardes was tacit itself. He knew perfectly well, from De Guiche's attitude, which was cold and dignified, that the conversation was about to take a disagreeable

turn. He resolved to let it take its course and to keep on his guard.

"What is it, if you please, that you did not tell him?" asked De Guiche.

"About La Vallière."

"La Vallière — what is it? And what was that strange circumstance you knew in England which Bragelonne, who was here, did not know?"

"Do you put this question to me seriously?"

"I could not be more serious."

"What! You a courtier, living at Madame's; you, a guest of the house, a friend of Monsieur's; you, the favorite of our beautiful princess!"

De Guiche reddened with anger.

"To what princess do you refer?" said he.

"Why, I know only one, my dear fellow, I am speaking of Madame. Are you devoted to another princess, tell me?"

De Guiche was about to launch forth, but he saw the feint.

A quarrel was imminent between the two young men. De Wardes wished the quarrel to be only in Madame's name, while De Guiche would not accept it save in La Vallière's. From that moment it became a series of feints, which was to last until one or the other was touched.

De Guiche, therefore, resumed all his self-possession.

"There is not the slightest question of Madame in this, my dear De Wardes," said he, "it has to do with the matter of which we were speaking just now."

"What was I saying?"

"That you had concealed certain things from Bragelonne."

"You knew that as well as I," replied De Wardes.

"No, on my honor."

"Come, now."

"If you will tell me then I shall know; not otherwise, I swear."

"What? I have just arrived from a distance of sixty leagues, while you have not stirred from here. You have seen with your own eyes what rumor told me at Calais, and you tell me seriously that you do not know. Oh, count, you are not honest!"

"That may be as you please, De Wardes, but I repeat I know nothing."

"You are discreet. That is prudent."

"Do you will tell me nothing more than you told Bragelonne?"

"You are pretending to be deaf. I am convinced that Madame has not more command over herself than have you."

"Ah, double hypocrite!" murmured De Guiche, "there you are returning to that subject again!"

"Well, then," continued De Wardes, "since it is so difficult for us to come to an understanding about La Vallière and Bragelonne, let us talk about your own personal affairs."

"But," said De Guiche, "I have no personal affairs. You said nothing about me, I suppose, to Bragelonne which you would not repeat to me."

"No, but please to understand, De Guiche, that ignorant as I am of certain matters, I am quite as well up on others. If, for instance, I was speaking to you about the intimacies of M. de Buckingham at Paris as I did on my journey with the duke, I could tell you many interesting things. Shall I do so?"

De Guiche passed his hand across his forehead, which was damp with perspiration.

"No," said he, "a hundred times no! I have no curiosity about that which does not concern me. M. de Buckingham is but a simple acquaintance of mine, while Raoul is my intimate friend. I have no curiosity, therefore, to know what happened to M. de Buckingham, while I take the greatest interest in knowing what happened to Raoul."

"In Paris?"

"Yes, in Paris or Boulogne. You understand that I am here. If anything happens I am ready to meet it while Raoul is absent and has only me to represent him. So Raoul's affairs before my own."

"But Raoul will return?"

"Yes, after his commission is executed. In the meantime evil reports cannot be circulated about him without my inquiring into them."

"Especially since he will remain some time in London," said De Wardes, chuckling.

"You think so?" asked De Guiche, innocently.

"I should think so! Do you believe he was sent to London simply to go there and return? No, he was sent to London to stay there."

"Ah, count," said De Guiche, grasping De Wardes' hand,

"this is a very serious suspicion for Bragelonne, which fully confirms what he wrote to me from Boulogne."

De Wardes became cold again; his love of raillery had pushed him on, and by his own imprudence he had laid himself open to attack.

"Well, come, what did he write?" he asked.

"That you had made some evil insinuations against La Vallière, and that you had seemed to laugh at his great confidence in the young girl."

"Yes, I did all that," said De Wardes, "and I was ready, when I did it, to hear from the Vicomte de Bragelonne what one man says to another when the latter has displeased him. In the same way, for instance, if I were seeking a quarrel with you, I should tell you that Madame, after having shown the greatest preference for M. de Buckingham, is supposed at present to have sent away the handsome duke for your benefit."

"Oh, that would not wound me in the least, De Wardes," said De Guiche, smiling in spite of the shiver which ran through him like fire. "Why, such a favor would be delightful!"

"Agreed; but if I wished absolutely to pick a quarrel with you I should invent a falsehood, and speak to you of a certain grove in which you meet this illustrious princess. I should speak of certain kneeling attitudes, of certain hand-kissings, and you who are a secretive man, hasty and punctilious —"

"Well, no, I swear," said De Guiche, interrupting him with a smile on his lips, although he felt as though he should die, "that I should not like that, nor should I contradict you. But so I am made, my dear comte. For things that affect me, I am like ice. But it is a different thing when it is a question of an absent friend, a friend, who, on leaving, confided his interests to my safe-keeping. In that case, you see, De Wardes, I am all on fire."

"I understand you, M. de Guiche; but you have spoken needlessly. Between us there can be no question, either of Bragelonne or of that unimportant girl called La Vallière."

Just then some of the younger courtiers crossed the room, and having heard the words which had just been spoken, were about to hear those which were to follow.

But De Wardes saw this and continued aloud:

"Oh, if La Vallière were a coquette like Madame, whose

innocent flirtations, I am sure, first caused M. de Buckingham to be sent back to England, and afterwards you to be exiled — for you succumb to her coquetry, do you not, monsieur — ?”

The gentlemen drew near, Saint-Aignan at their head, Manicamp next.

“But, my dear fellow,” said De Guiche, laughing. “I am vain, as every one knows. I took a jest seriously, and brought about my exile. But I saw my error, I overcame my vanity, and I obtained my recall by making honorable amends and by promising myself to conquer this fault; and as you see, I am so well cured that now I laugh at what four days ago broke my heart. But Raoul is loved; he does not laugh at rumors which disturb his peace of mind, rumors which you have undertaken to interpret, when you knew, count, as well as myself, — these gentlemen, the whole world, — that these reports were nothing but calumny.”

“Calumny!” cried De Wardes, furious at seeing himself caught in the trap by De Guiche’s coolness.

“Why, yes, calumny. Here is his letter, in which he says that you spoke ill of Mademoiselle de la Vallière, and in which he asks if what you said about the young girl is true. Shall I call on these gentlemen to decide, De Wardes?” And with perfect indifference De Guiche read aloud the paragraph of the letter referring to La Vallière.

“Now,” continued De Guiche, “it is very evident that you meant to trouble the peace of mind of this dear Bragelonne, and that your intentions were malicious.”

De Wardes looked around to see if he could find support from any one, but at the thought that he had insulted, either directly or indirectly, the one who was the idol of the hour, every head was shaken, and De Wardes saw only men ready to say he was in the wrong.

“Gentlemen,” said De Guiche, instinctively divining the general sentiment, “my discussion with M. de Wardes refers to a subject of so delicate a nature that it is important that no one should hear more than you have already heard. Have the doors watched, I beg you, and let us finish this conversation in a manner which becomes two gentlemen, one of whom has given the other the lie.”

“Gentlemen! gentlemen!” exclaimed those who were present.

“Do you think that I was wrong to defend Mademoiselle de la Vallière?” said De Guiche. “If so, I pass judgment upon

myself, and am ready to withdraw the offensive words I may have used to M. de Wardes."

"The deuce!" said Saint-Aignan; "certainly not. Mademoiselle de la Vallière is an angel."

"Virtue and purity personified," said Manicamp.

"You see, M. de Wardes," said De Guiche, "I am not the only one who is undertaking the defence of that poor girl. I entreat you, gentlemen, a second time to leave us. You see that it is impossible to be calmer than we are."

The courtiers asked nothing better than to withdraw. Some left by one door, some by another, until the two young men were alone.

"Well played," said De Wardes to the count.

"Was it not?" replied the latter.

"What can you expect? I have become rusty in the country, my dear fellow, while you have gained so much self-control that you astonish me, count. One always acquires something in the society of women, so accept my congratulations."

"I will."

"And I shall return them to Madame."

"Now, my dear M. de Wardes, let us speak as loud as you please."

"Do not defy me."

"I do defy you. You are known as a malicious man. If you do that you will be looked upon as a coward, and Monsieur will have you hanged this evening from his window casement. Speak, my dear De Wardes, speak."

"I have fought before now."

"Yes, but not enough."

"I see that you would not be sorry to fight with me while my wounds are still open."

"No, I should be all the more pleased."

"The deuce! You have chosen a bad time, my dear count; a duel after the one I have just fought would not suit me. I lost too much blood at Boulogne; at the least effort my wounds would reopen and you would have too easy a job."

"True," said De Guiche, "and yet on your arrival here your looks and your arms made a good appearance."

"Yes, my arms are all right, but my legs are weak, and then I have not held a foil since that devilish duel, while you, I'll wager, have been fencing every day in order successfully to carry out your little conspiracy against me."

"Upon my honor, monsieur," replied De Guiche, "it is half a year since I practised."

"No, you see, count, upon reflection I will not fight, at least with you. I will wait for Bragelonne, since you say that it is Bragelonne that is angry with me."

"No, indeed," cried De Guiche, beside himself, "you shall not wait for Bragelonne, for as you have said Bragelonne may be delayed in returning, and in the meantime your maliciousness will have done its work."

"Yet I shall have an excuse. Take care!"

"I will give you a week to recover completely."

"That is better. In a week we shall see."

"Yes, I understand, in a week you can escape your adversary. No, not a day."

"You are mad, monsieur," said De Wardes, retreating a step.

"And you are a coward if you do not fight willingly."

"Well?"

"I will denounce you to the King as having refused to fight after having insulted La Vallière."

"Ah!" exclaimed De Wardes, "you are dangerously treacherous, Sir Honesty."

"Nothing is more dangerous than the treachery of the man who is always loyal."

"Give me back my legs then, or have yourself bled until you are white and so equalize our chances."

"No, I have a better idea than that."

"What is it?"

"We will mount our horses and will fire three pistol shots each. You are a first-rate marksman, I have seen you bring down swallows with single balls and at full gallop. Do not deny it, for I have seen you."

"I believe you are right," said De Wardes, "and it is possible that I may kill you."

"Really you would be doing me a great service."

"I shall do my best."

"Is it agreed?"

"Your hand."

"Here it is, on one condition, however."

"What is that?"

"That you will swear to say nothing or have nothing said of the matter to the King."

"Nothing, I swear."

"I shall go for my horse."

"And I for mine."

"Where will we fight?"

"In the plain I know an excellent place."

"Shall we go together?"

"Why not?"

And both set out to the stables, passing on their way Madame's windows, which were faintly lighted. A shadow passed behind the lace curtains.

"There is a woman," said De Wardes, smiling, "who has no idea that we are about to die for her."

CHAPTER LIX.

THE DUEL.

DE WARDES and De Guiche chose their horses. Then each saddled his own.

De Wardes had no pistols; De Guiche had two pairs. He went to his apartments to load them, and gave the choice to De Wardes, who selected those of which he had made use twenty times, the same with which De Guiche had seen him kill swallows on the wing.

"You will not be surprised," said he, "if I take every precaution. You know your own weapons, consequently I am only making the chances equal."

"That remark was useless," replied De Guiche. "You are doing no more than what you are entitled to do."

"Now," said De Wardes, "I beg you to be good enough to help me mount, for I still find some difficulty in doing so."

"In that case we had better settle the matter on foot."

"No, once in the saddle I am all right."

"Very well, we will speak no more about it."

And De Guiche helped De Wardes mount.

"Now," continued De Wardes, "in our eagerness to kill each other we have forgotten one thing."

"What is that?"

"That it is dark, and we shall have to grope about in order to kill each other."

"So be it, but the result will be the same."

"But we must think of something further, that honest people do not fight without witnesses."

"Oh," cried De Guiche, "you are as anxious as I that everything should be well done."

"Yes, but I do not wish it said that you have assassinated me, any more than I should want to be accused of a crime in case I killed you."

"Was anything similar said in regard to your duel with M. de Buckingham," said De Guiche, "which took place under the same conditions as ours?"

"Very true, but it was daylight, and we were up to our waists in water; besides, there was a large number of spectators on the shore."

De Guiche pondered for an instant, but the thought which had already entered his mind was only confirmed, namely, that De Wardes wished witnesses before whom he could bring back the conversation to Madame, and so give a new turn to the duel.

He said nothing in reply, therefore, and as De Wardes looked at him questioningly for the last time he answered with a nod which meant that it was best to let things remain as they were.

Consequently the two adversaries set out, leaving the château by the gate which we know as the one near which we saw Montalais and Malicorne.

The night, as though to offset the heat of the day, had gathered all the clouds it could and was pushing them silently from west to east. The vault above, without a clear spot visible, hung with all its weight over the earth, but was soon rent by the efforts of the wind, as a huge sail is torn into ribbons. Large, warm drops of water began to fall upon the ground, where they gathered the dust into rolling globules. At the same time the hedges, which felt the approach of the storm, the thirsty flowers, and the drooping trees exhaled a thousand aromatic odors which brought to mind tender thoughts, memories of youth, eternal life, happiness, and love.

"The earth smells very good," said De Wardes. "It is a piece of coquetry on her part to draw us to her."

"By the way," replied De Guiche, "several ideas have come to me and I want to submit them to you."

"About?"

"About our duel."

"Yes, it is time, it seems to me, that we should begin to speak about it."

"Is it to be an ordinary duel, conducted according to precedent?"

"Let us hear what your precedent is."

"We dismount in an open place, fasten our horses to the nearest object, meet without our weapons, then step back a hundred and fifty paces before advancing upon each other."

"Good! That is the way in which I killed poor Follivent three weeks ago at Saint-Denis."

"Pardon me, but you forget one detail."

"What is that?"

"That in your duel with Follivent you advanced upon each other on foot, your swords between your teeth, your pistols in your hands."

"True. While this time, on the contrary, as I cannot walk, — you admit this yourself, — we are to mount and charge, and he who wishes to fire first will do so."

"That is the best course, no doubt, but it is dark and we must make more allowance for poor marksmanship than we should have to do in the daytime."

"Very well. Each one will fire three shots — two from the already loaded pistols, while for the last we shall have to load again."

"Excellent. Where shall the duel take place?"

"Have you any preference?"

"No."

"You see that little wood which lies before us?"

"The Rochain woods?"

"Yes."

"You know it?"

"Perfectly."

"You know, then, that there is an open space in the centre?"

"Let us go there."

"Very well."

"It is a kind of meadow, enclosed by nature, and it has all sorts of roads, by-paths, walks, ditches, windings, and avenues; it will be just the thing."

"I shall be satisfied if you are. We have reached it, I think?"

"Yes, look at the beautiful space in the centre. The faint light which falls from the stars, as Corneille said, is concentrated in this spot. Its natural limits are the woods which surround it with their barriers."

"Very good. Do as you said."

"Let us settle the conditions, then."

"Here are mine; if you have any objections to make, state them now."

"I am listening."

"In case the horse is killed his rider will fight on foot."

"That is indisputable, since we have no extra horses."

"But it does not oblige the adversary to dismount."

"The adversary will be free to act as seems best to him."

"The duellists having once met cannot withdraw again, and consequently must fire at short range."

"Agreed."

"Three charges, no more?"

"That will suffice, I think. Here are powder and balls for your pistols."

"Measure out three charges. Take three balls; I shall do the same. Then we will throw away the remaining powder and balls."

"And we will swear by the Christ," added De Wardes, "that we have no more powder or balls about us?"

"That is agreed, and I swear it."

De Guiche raised his hand towards heaven.

De Wardes did the same.

"And now, my dear count," said he, "let me tell you that I am deceived as to nothing. You are or you will be Madame's lover. I have detected your secret, and you are afraid that I shall noise it abroad. You wish to kill me in order to ensure my silence. That is clear, and in your place I should do the same."

De Guiche bent his head.

"Only," continued De Wardes, triumphantly, "was it worth while, tell me, to throw on my shoulders that wretched affair of Bragelonne's? Take care, my dear fellow, in bringing the wild boar to bay you enrage him; in running down the fox you inspire him with the courage of the jaguar. The result is that, pushed to the wall by you, I shall defend myself to the last."

"That is your right."

"Yes, but take care. I shall do much harm. In order to begin, you can easily believe, can you not, that I have not been foolish enough to lock up my secret, or rather your secret, in my heart? There is a friend of mine, a reliable friend, — you know him, — who shares my secret; so understand that if you kill me, my death will not have helped you much; while, on the contrary, if I kill you — well, everything is possible, you know."

De Guiche shuddered.

"If I kill you," continued De Wardes, "you will have secured for Madame two enemies, who will work their utmost to ruin her."

"Oh, monsieur," cried De Guiche, wild with rage, "do not count so surely on my death. Of the two enemies, I hope to kill one immediately, and the other at my first opportunity."

De Wardes replied only by a burst of laughter so diabolical that it would have terrified a superstitious man.

But De Guiche was not so impressionable.

"I think," said he, "that everything is settled, M. de Wardes, so take your place, I beg you, unless you prefer that I should do so."

"No," said De Wardes, "I shall be delighted to spare you any trouble."

And spurring his horse to a gallop, he crossed the open space and took his stand at a point exactly opposite De Guiche. The latter remained motionless. At this distance of about a hundred paces the two opponents were absolutely invisible to each other, lost, as they were, in the thick shadow of the elms and the chestnuts.

A minute elapsed in the profoundest silence. At the end of the minute, each man from the shade in which he was hidden heard the double click of the trigger.

De Guiche, following the usual tactics, put his horse to the gallop, convinced that he would render his safety doubly sure by the movement and speed of the animal. He directed his course straight to the point where he thought his enemy was standing. He expected to meet De Wardes half way, but he was mistaken. He continued his course, supposing that De Wardes was waiting for him motionless; but when he had gone about two-thirds of the distance he saw the road suddenly illumined and a ball whistled by, cutting in two the plume of his hat.

Almost at the same time and as if the flash of the first shot had served to throw light for the other, a second report was heard and the second ball passed through the head of De Guiche's horse, a little below the ear, and the animal fell.

These two shots, coming from exactly the opposite direction from that in which he expected to find De Wardes, surprised De Guiche; but as he was a man of great self-possession he calculated his fall, though not so well but that the toe of his boot was caught under his horse. Fortunately in his dying agonies the horse made a movement that permitted De Guiche to free his foot. He rose, felt himself, and found he was not wounded.

The moment he knew that his horse was falling he had placed his pistols in the holsters, fearing that the shock of the fall might send off one or both of them, completely disarming him. Once on his feet he took the weapons and advanced to the place where, by the light of the flash, he had seen De Wardes. At the first shot De Guiche had understood the manœuvre of his adversary, than which nothing could be more simple.

Instead of advancing against De Guiche or remaining motionless, De Wardes had followed the circle of the shadow which hid him from view for about fifteen paces, and just as his adversary presented his open flank he had fired from his position, carefully taking aim and assisted instead of being inconvenienced by the gallop of the horse.

We have seen that notwithstanding the darkness the first ball had passed scarcely an inch above De Guiche's head. De Wardes had been so sure of his aim that he thought he saw De Guiche fall. His astonishment was great, then, when he saw the rider erect in his saddle.

He hastened to fire his second shot, but by a slip of the hand he killed the horse. It would have been a fortunate blunder for him if De Guiche had remained under the animal. Before he could have freed himself De Wardes would have sent his third ball, and would have had De Guiche at his mercy. But De Guiche was on his feet, and still had three shots to fire.

De Guiche understood his position. It was a question of gaining on De Wardes in speed. He advanced in order to reach him before he should have had time to reload his pistol.

De Wardes saw him coming like a tempest. The ball was

tight and resisted the ramrod. To load carelessly would be to run the risk of losing his last shot. To load carefully would be to lose time, or rather life. He made his horse bound to one side.

De Guiche also turned, and as the horse, which had reared, came down, fired, carrying away De Wardes' hat.

De Wardes knew that he had a moment to spare. He took advantage of it to finish loading his pistol.

De Guiche, seeing that his adversary had not fallen, threw aside the first pistol, now useless, and walked towards De Wardes, raising the second. But at his third step De Wardes took aim and fired. An exclamation of anger followed. The count's arm dropped, the pistol fell to the ground.

De Wardes saw the count stoop, pick up the pistol with his left hand, and start forward. It was an awful moment.

"I am lost," murmured De Wardes, "he is not mortally wounded."

But as De Guiche raised his pistol, the head, shoulders, and limbs of the count gave way. He heaved a mournful sigh, and fell at the feet of De Wardes' horse.

"Away, now," murmured the latter, and gathering up his reins he set spurs to his horse.

The animal cleared the now motionless body, and bore De Wardes rapidly back to the château. Once there, De Wardes remained a quarter of an hour deliberating. In his impatience to leave the field of battle he had neglected to make sure that De Guiche was dead.

A double hypothesis presented itself to his agitated mind. Either De Guiche was killed, or was merely wounded.

In the former case, why leave his body to the wolves? That were useless cruelty, since if De Guiche were dead he certainly could not speak. If he were not dead, why, by not bringing him aid, should De Wardes act as a savage incapable of generosity?

The latter consideration determined him.

He asked where Manicamp was, and learned that Manicamp had been looking for De Guiche, but not knowing where to find him had gone to bed.

De Wardes went to the sleeper, wakened him, and told him the story, to which Manicamp listened without comment, but with an expression of growing energy of which no one would have believed him capable.

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But when De Wardes had finished, Manicamp uttered the single word —

"Come!"

On the way Manicamp became more and more excited, and as De Wardes gave him the details, he grew more and more gloomy.

"And so," said he, when De Wardes had finished, "you think him dead?"

"Alas! yes."

"And you fought like that without witnesses?"

"He insisted on it."

"It is strange."

"Why is it strange?"

"That is so little in accordance with M. de Guiche's nature!"

"You do not doubt my word, I suppose?"

"Hum!"

"You do doubt it?"

"A little; but I shall doubt it more than ever, I warn you, if I find the poor fellow dead."

"M. Manicamp!"

"M. de Wardes!"

"It seems that you are insulting me!"

"That is as you please. I never did like people who come and say, 'I have killed such and such a gentleman in a corner. It is a great pity, but I killed him in an honorable manner.' It looks very black, M. de Wardes."

"Be still, we have arrived."

In fact, the clearing was beginning to be visible, and in the open space lay the body of the dead horse. To the right of the horse, upon the dark grass, with his face to the ground, lay the poor count, bathed in blood. He was still in the same place, and did not seem to have stirred.

Manicamp fell on his knees, raised the count, and found him cold and covered with blood. He let him fall back again. Then, feeling around him, he looked until he found De Guiche's pistol.

"*Morbleu!*" said he, rising, pale as a ghost, the pistol in his hand, "*Morbleu!* You were not mistaken, he is certainly dead."

"Dead!" repeated De Wardes.

"Yes, and his pistol is loaded," said Manicamp, looking into the chamber.

"But did I not tell you that I covered him as he was walking, and that I fired just as he was taking aim at me?"

"Are you perfectly sure that you fought with him, M. de Wardes? I admit that I am afraid you murdered him. Oh, do not exclaim. You took your three shots, and his pistol is loaded. You killed his horse, and De Guiche, one of the best marksmen, touched neither you nor your horse. M. de Wardes, it is unlucky for you that you brought me here. All this blood goes to my head. I am drunk, and upon my word I believe since so good an opportunity presents itself that I will blow out your brains. Commit your soul to God, M. de Wardes."

"M. Manicamp, you cannot think of such a thing!"

"On the contrary, I am thinking very strongly of it."

"You would assassinate me?"

"Without the slightest remorse, at least for the time being."

"Are you a gentleman?"

"I have been a page. That proves it."

"Let me defend myself, then."

"Good! In order that you may do to me what you have done to poor De Guiche."

And, raising his pistol, Manicamp held it with arm outstretched, and frowning brow, pointed at De Wardes' breast.

The latter did not even attempt to run; he was petrified.

In the terrible silence, which lasted but an instant, but which seemed to De Wardes a century, a sigh was heard.

"Oh!" cried De Wardes, "he lives! he lives! Help! M. de Guiche! They are murdering me."

Manicamp stepped back and between the two young men the count could be seen raising himself painfully on one hand.

Manicamp threw the pistol ten feet away, and ran to his friend, uttering a cry of joy.

De Wardes wiped his forehead, which was covered with a cold perspiration.

"Just in time!" he murmured.

"What is the matter?" asked Manicamp of De Guiche; "and how are you wounded?"

De Guiche showed his mutilated hand and his chest, which was covered with blood.

"Count," cried De Wardes, "I am accused of having assassinated you. Speak, I implore you, and say that I fought honorably."

"That is true," said the wounded man. "M. de Wardes fought honorably, and whoever says otherwise will make an enemy of me."

"Well, monsieur," said Manicamp, "in the first place help me to move this poor fellow. Afterwards I shall give you all possible satisfaction. Or if you are in too much of a hurry we can do better. Let us stanch the count's wounds with our handkerchiefs, and then as there are two balls left we can use them."

"Thank you," said De Wardes. "Twice in one hour I have seen Death close at hand. He is too ugly-looking and I prefer your apologies."

Manicamp began to laugh and De Guiche joined in spite of his suffering.

The two young men wanted to carry him, but he declared that he was strong enough to walk alone. The ball had broken his ring finger and his little finger, then had glanced along his side, but without penetrating his chest. It was the pain rather than the serious nature of his wounds which had overcome him.

Manicamp passed his arm under one of the count's shoulders, De Wardes put his under the other, and in this way they carried him back to Fontainebleau, to the doctor who had been present at the death of the Franciscan, the predecessor of Aramis.

CHAPTER LX.

THE KING'S SUPPER.

MEANWHILE the King was sitting at table and the few guests of the day had taken their places after the usual gesture intimating that they might sit.

Although etiquette at this period was not such as it was later, the French court had entirely broken away from the traditions of good fellowship and patriarchal affability which

existed in the time of Henri IV. The suspicious mind of Louis XIII. had by degrees replaced them by a semblance of pomp and grandeur which he found it impossible to attain.

The King was seated at a small, separate table, which, like the desk of a president, overlooked the adjoining tables. A small table, we have said, but we must hasten to add that although small, it was larger than all the others. Moreover, it was the one on which were placed the greatest number and variety of dishes, fish, game, meats, fruits, vegetables, and preserves.

The King was young and vigorous, fond of hunting, and given to all violent exercise, and, moreover, he possessed that naturally hot blood, common to all the Bourbons, which conduces to rapid digestion and renewed appetite. Louis XIV. was a formidable eater. He loved to criticise his cooks; but when he paid them a compliment the honor was great.

The King began a meal by eating several kinds of soup, either mixed together in a sort of macédoine, or separately. He intermixed, or rather separated, these soups by a glass of old wine. He ate quickly and somewhat greedily.

Porthos, who from the beginning had through respect been waiting for a nudge from D'Artagnan, seeing the King accomplish so much, turned to the musketeer and said in a low tone:

"It seems that one might go on. His Majesty is encouraging. Look!"

"The King eats," said D'Artagnan, "but he talks at the same time. Try to arrange matters so that if by chance he should address a remark to you he would not find you with your mouth full, which would be disrespectful."

"In that case the best way," said Porthos, "is to eat no supper at all. And yet I am hungry, I admit, and everything is so good that it appeals both to my sense of smell and my sense of taste."

"Do not think of not eating," said D'Artagnan; "that would vex his Majesty. The King has a way of saying that he who eats well works well, and he does not like people to have small appetites at his table."

"How can I help having my mouth full if I eat?" said Porthos.

"Why," replied the captain of the musketeers, "simply swallow what you have in it, when the King honors you by addressing a word to you."

"Very good."

And from that moment Porthos began to eat with well-bred enthusiasm.

The King occasionally looked at the guests, and, thorough student of character as he was, could appreciate the disposition of each.

"M. du Vallon!" said he.

Porthos was in the act of eating a hare ragout and he swallowed half of the back. His name uttered in such a manner made him start, and by a vigorous effort of his gullet he swallowed the whole mouthful.

"Sire," said Porthos, in a choked voice, but sufficiently intelligible, nevertheless.

"Let those lamb fillets be passed to M. du Vallon," said the King. "Do you like brown meats, M. du Vallon?"

"Sire, I like everything," replied Porthos.

D'Artagnan whispered to him: "Everything your Majesty sends me."

Porthos repeated: "Everything your Majesty sends me."

The King gave a nod of satisfaction.

"People eat well who work well," went on the King, delighted to have with him one who had Porthos' capacity for eating.

Porthos received the dish of lamb and put some of it on his plate.

"Well?" said the King.

"Exquisite!" said Porthos, calmly.

"Have you as good mutton in your province, M. du Vallon?" continued the King.

"Sire," said Porthos, "I think that in my province, as everywhere else, the best is first for the King; but I do not eat mutton in the same way as does your Majesty."

"Ah! and how do you eat it?"

"Usually I have a lamb dressed whole."

"Whole?"

"Yes, Sire."

"In what way?"

"In this way: my cook is a German, Sire, and stuffs the

lamb with small sausages, which he gets from Strasburg; force-meat balls from Troyes, and larks from Pithiviers. By some means of which I am ignorant he bones the lamb as he would a fowl, leaving on the skin, however, which forms a brown crust over the animal. When it is cut in beautiful slices, like an enormous sausage, a rose-colored gravy comes forth, which is both pleasing to the eye and delicious to the palate." And Porthos smacked his lips. The King opened his eyes in delight, and, while attacking the pheasant which was handed him, said:

"That is a dish I should like to taste, M. du Vallon. What! the whole lamb?"

"The whole, Sire."

"Pass these pheasants to M. du Vallon; I see that he is a connoisseur." The order was carried out. Then, returning to the subject of the lamb:

"And it is not too fat?"

"No, Sire; the fat falls away at the same time as the gravy, and swims on the surface; then my carver removes it with a silver spoon which I had made for that purpose."

"Where do you live?" asked the King.

"At Pierrefonds, Sire."

"At Pierrefonds? Where is that M. du Vallon? Near Belie-Isle?"

"Oh, no, Sire. Pierrefonds is in the Soissonnais."

"I thought you told me about the lamb on account of the salt marshes."

"No, Sire. I have marshes which are not salt, it is true, but which are none the less valuable."

The King had reached the side dishes, but without losing sight of Porthos, who continued to play his part as well as he could.

"You have a splendid appetite, M. du Vallon," said the King, "and you are a delightful guest."

"Ah, Sire, if your Majesty ever came to Pierrefonds we would eat our lamb together, for you are not without a good appetite yourself."

D'Artagnan gave Porthos a sound kick under the table. Porthos colored.

"At your Majesty's fortunate age," said Porthos, in order to repair his blunder, "I was in the musketeers, and nothing could satisfy me. Your Majesty, as I have just had the honor

of telling you, has a good appetite, but you make too delicate a choice of your food to be called a great eater."

The King seemed charmed with his guest's politeness.

"Will you try some of these creams?" said he to Porthos.

"Sir, your Majesty treats me with too much kindness for me not to tell you the whole truth."

"Pray do so, M. du Vallon."

"Well, Sire, with regard to sweets, I know only pastry, and even that should be quite solid. All these frothy foods swell the stomach, and occupy space which seems to me to be too precious to be so poorly occupied."

"Ah, messieurs," said the King, pointing to Porthos, "there is a veritable model of gastronomy. In such a way our fathers used to eat, who knew what good eating was, while we," added his Majesty, "upset our stomachs."

As he spoke he took the breast of a chicken with ham. Porthos attacked a dish of partridges and quails. The cup-bearer filled his Majesty's glass.

"Give M. du Vallon some of my wine," said the King.

This was one of the greatest honors of the royal table. D'Artagnan pressed his friend's knee.

"If you can swallow only the half of that boar's head which I see yonder," said he to Porthos, "I shall believe you will be a duke and peer within the year."

"I shall attack it presently," said Porthos, phlegmatically.

The boar's turn was not slow in coming, for the King took pleasure in urging on his hungry guest; he had no dish passed to Porthos until he had tasted it himself; so he took some of the boar's head. Porthos showed himself good for the task. Instead of eating the half of it, as D'Artagnan had suggested, he ate three-fourths of it.

"It is impossible," said the King in a low tone, "that a gentleman who eats so good a supper every day, and who has such beautiful teeth, is not the most honest man in my kingdom."

"Do you hear that?" said D'Artagnan in his friend's ear.

"Yes, I think I am somewhat in favor," said Porthos, balancing himself on his chair.

"Oh, you are in luck's way!"

The King and Porthos continued to eat in the same way, to the great satisfaction of the other guests, some of whom from

emulation had attempted to keep up with them, but had been obliged to give up half way.

The King began to get flushed, and the reaction of the blood to his face showed that the moment of repletion had come. It was then that Louis XIV., instead of becoming gay, like all drinkers, grew dull and silent.

Porthos, on the contrary, became lively and talkative. More than once D'Artagnan's foot reminded him of this fact. The dessert then appeared.

The King no longer thought of Porthos. He turned his eyes to the door and he was heard to ask occasionally why M. de Saint-Aignan was so long in coming. Just as, with a deep sigh, his Majesty was finishing a jar of preserved plums, M. de Saint-Aignan appeared. The King's eyes, which by degrees had become dull, at once brightened. The count advanced towards the table and Louis arose.

Every one did the same, even Porthos, who was finishing a piece of almond cake capable of making the jaws of a crocodile stick together. The supper was over.

CHAPTER LXI.

AFTER SUPPER.

THE King took Saint-Aignan's arm and passed into the adjoining room.

"How late you are, count!" said he.

"I was bringing the answer, Sire," replied Saint-Aignan.

"It took her a long time to answer what I wrote."

"Sire, your Majesty deigned to write verses, and Mademoiselle de la Vallière wished to repay your Majesty in the same coin, that is, in gold."

"Verses, Saint-Aignan!" cried the King, delighted; "give them to me!" And Louis broke the seal of a small letter containing the verses which history has preserved for us, and which have merit so far as the writer's intention, and not her execution, was concerned. Such as they were, however, they delighted the King, who showed his pleasure by unequivocal transports of joy; but the universal silence warned

Louis, so particular as to decorum, that his delight might give rise to various interpretations. He turned and put the note in his pocket; then taking a step which brought him back to the threshold of the door near his guests, he said:

"M. du Vallon, I have seen you with the greatest pleasure, and I shall see you again with renewed pleasure."

Porthos bowed, as the Colossus of Rhodes might have done, and withdrew from the room backwards.

"M. d'Artagnan," continued the King, "you will await my orders in the gallery. I am obliged to you for having made me acquainted with M. du Vallon. Messieurs, I return to Paris to-morrow on account of the departure of the ambassadors from Spain and Holland. Until to-morrow, then."

The apartment was at once cleared of its guests. The King took Saint-Aignan's arm, and made him read La Vallière's verses over again.

"What do you think of them?" said he.

"Sire, they are charming."

"They certainly charm me, and were they known —"

"Oh, the poets would be jealous of them; but they will not know of them."

"Did you give her mine?"

"Oh, Sire, she devoured them."

"I was afraid they were weak."

"That is not what Mademoiselle de la Vallière said of them."

"Do you think she liked them?"

"I am sure of it, Sire."

"I must answer, then."

"Oh, Sire, immediately after supper? Your Majesty will tire yourself."

"I suppose you are right; study, after eating, is injurious."

"Especially the labor of a poet. Besides, just at present there is great excitement at Mademoiselle de la Vallière's."

"What excitement?"

"The same that is affecting all the ladies."

"Why?"

"Because of the accident to poor De Guiche."

"What! has something happened to De Guiche?"

"Yes, Sire, one of his hands is nearly gone; he has a hole in his breast, and is dying."

"Great Heavens! Who told you?"

"Manicamp has just taken him to a doctor at Fontainebleau, and the rumor spread."

"Taken him? Poor De Guiche! How did it happen?"

"Ah, that is it, Sire, — how did it happen?"

"You say that in a strange way, Saint-Aignan. Give me the details. What does he say?"

"He says nothing, Sire; but the others —"

"What others?"

"Those who brought him back, Sire."

"Who are they?"

"I do not know, Sire; but M. de Manicamp knows, for he is one of his friends."

"Like every one else," said the King.

"Oh, no," said Saint-Aignan, "you are mistaken, Sire. Every one is not exactly a friend of M. de Guiche."

"How do you know that?"

"Does your Majesty wish me to explain myself?"

"Certainly I do."

"Well, Sire, I think I have heard about a quarrel between two gentlemen."

"When?"

"This very evening, before your Majesty's supper."

"That scarcely proves anything. I have issued such severe orders in regard to duelling that no one, I presume, would dare to disobey them."

"In that case, may God preserve me from excusing any one!" exclaimed Saint-Aignan. "Your Majesty commanded me to speak and I spoke."

"Tell me, then, how the Comte de Guiche has been wounded."

"Sire, they say it was at a boar-hunt."

"This evening?"

"Yes."

"One of his hands shattered! A hole in his breast! Who was at the hunt with him?"

"I do not know, Sire. But M. de Manicamp knows, or ought to know."

"You are hiding something from me, Saint-Aignan."

"Nothing, Sire, nothing."

"Then explain the accident to me. Was it a musket that burst?"

"Possibly. But on reflection, it could not have been, Sire, for De Guiche's pistol, still loaded, was found near him."

"His pistol? But one does not go to a boar-hunt with a pistol, it seems to me."

"Sire, it is said also that De Guiche's horse was killed, and that its body is still in the clearing."

"His horse? De Guiche went on horseback to the boar-hunt? De Saint-Aignan, I do not understand a word of what you are saying. Where did the affair happen?"

"Sire, in the Rochin woods, at the Rond-Point."

"Very good. Call M. d'Artagnan."

Saint-Aignan obeyed. The musketeer entered.

"M. d'Artagnan," said the King, "you will leave by the small door of the private staircase."

"Yes, Sire."

"You will mount your horse."

"Yes, Sire."

"And you will go to the Rond-Point in the Rochin woods. Do you know the place?"

"Sire, I have fought there twice."

"What!" exclaimed the King, amazed at the reply.

"Sire, under the edicts of Cardinal Richelieu," went on D'Artagnan, with his usual calm.

"That is different, monsieur. You will therefore go and examine the locality carefully. A man has been wounded there, and you will find a dead horse. You will tell me what you think of the affair."

"Very good, Sire."

"It goes without saying that it is your opinion I want and not that of any one else."

"You shall have it within an hour, Sire."

"I forbid you to speak with any one, no matter who it may be."

"Except with the man who will give me a lantern," said D'Artagnan.

"Yes, of course," said the King, laughing at the liberty which he tolerated in none but his captain of musketeers.

D'Artagnan left by the little stairway.

"Now let my doctor be sent for," said Louis.

Ten minutes later the King's physician arrived, out of breath.

"Monsieur," said the King, "you will go with M. de Saint-Aignan wherever he may take you, and bring me an account of the condition of the patient you will see in the house to which I request you to go."

The physician obeyed, without making any comment, as at that time people were beginning to obey Louis XIV., and withdrew, preceding Saint-Aignan.

"You, Saint-Aignan, send me Manicamp, before the physician can speak to him."

Saint-Aignan left in his turn.

CHAPTER LXII.

HOW D'ARTAGNAN DISCHARGED THE MISSION WHICH THE KING GAVE HIM.

WHILE the King was making these arrangements, in order to discover the truth, D'Artagnan, without losing a second, ran to the stable, took down the lantern, saddled his horse himself, and set out to the place indicated by his Majesty. According to his promise, he had neither seen nor met any one, and, as we have said, he had carried his scruples to the point of doing without the help of the stable boys and grooms.

D'Artagnan was one of those who pride themselves in moments of difficulty on increasing their even value. By five minutes' galloping he reached the wood, tied his horse to the first tree he came to, and went on foot to the open space. Then, lantern in hand, he began to inspect the whole surface of the Rond-Point, went, came, measured, examined, and after half an hour's inspection, returned silently to his horse, and rode slowly and thoughtfully back to Fontainebleau.

Louis was waiting in his cabinet. He was alone, and was scribbling on a piece of paper some lines which, at first glance, D'Artagnan saw were unequal and full of corrections. He concluded they must be verses.

Louis looked up and saw D'Artagnan.

"Well, monsieur," said he, "do you bring me any news?"

"Yes, Sire."

"What have you seen?"

"In all probability, Sire —" said D'Artagnan.

"It was certainly I asked of you."

"I shall approach it as closely as possible. The weather was well fitted for such investigations as I have just made. It rained this evening, and the roads were wet."

"Well, M. d'Artagnan?"

"Sire, your Majesty told me that there was a dead horse at the cross-road of the Rochin woods; and I began by studying the woods. I say the woods, because the centre of the cross-road is reached by four roads.

"The one I myself took was the only one that presented fresh tracks. Two horses had followed it side by side; their eight feet were very distinctly marked in the clay.

"One of the riders was in a greater hurry than the other. The foot-prints of one were invariably in advance of the other about half a horse's length."

"Are you sure that they were together?" asked the King.

"Yes, Sire. The horses are two large animals of equal pace, horses used to manœuvres, for they wheeled together around the barrier of the Rond-Point."

"Well, monsieur?"

"The two riders stopped there for an instant, no doubt in order to regulate the conditions of the engagement. The horses grew impatient. One of the riders spoke, the other listened, contenting himself by merely answering. His horse pawed the ground, which proves that he was so taken up by listening that he dropped his bridle."

"An engagement took place, then?"

"Undoubtedly."

"Continue; you are a close observer."

"One of the two riders, the one who had been listening, remained where he was; the other crossed the open space, and at first placed himself opposite his adversary. Then the one who had remained still crossed about two-thirds of the Rond-Point at a gallop, thinking he would gain on his opponent; but the latter had followed the circumference of the wood."

"You do not know their names, do you?"

"No, Sire. Only the one who followed the circumference of the wood rode a black horse."

"How do you know that?"

"A few hairs of his tail were on the brambles along the side of the ditch."

"Go on."

"As to the other horse, I had no trouble in making him out, since he was dead on the field of battle."

"What caused his death?"

"A ball which had passed through his temple."

"Was the ball that of a pistol or a gun?"

"Of a pistol, Sire. Besides, the wound of the horse showed me the tactics of the man who had killed it. He had followed the circumference of the wood to take his adversary in the flank. Besides, I followed his foot-tracks on the grass."

"The tracks of the black horse?"

"Yes, Sire."

"Go on, M. d'Artagnan."

"Now that your Majesty perceives the position of the two adversaries, I must leave the rider who remained stationary for the one who galloped away."

"Do so."

"The horse of the rider who charged was killed on the spot."

"How do you know that?"

"The cavalier did not have to dismount, and fell with his horse. I saw the impression of his leg, which he drew with a great effort from under the horse. The spur, pressed down by the weight of the animal, had ploughed up the ground."

"Good. And what did he do on rising?"

"He walked straight up to his adversary."

"Still on the edge of the forest?"

"Yes, Sire. Then, having reached a good distance, he stopped, for his heels were stamped near each other, fired, and missed his adversary."

"How do you know he missed him?"

"I found a hat with a ball through it."

"Ah, a proof!" exclaimed the King.

"Insufficient, Sire," replied D'Artagnan, coldly, "it is a hat without letters or arms, bearing a red feather such as every hat has. Even the lace had nothing particular about it."

"And did the man with the hat fire a second time?"

"Oh, Sire, he had already fired twice."

"How did you find that out?"

"I found the wadding of the pistol."

"What became of the bullet which did not kill the horse?"

"It cut in two the feather of the hat belonging to the one against whom it was directed, and broke a small birch at the other end of the open space."

"In that case the man on the black horse was disarmed, while his adversary had still one more shot to fire."

"Sire, while the dismounted rider was rising, the other was

reloading his pistol. Only he was greatly agitated while reloading it, and his hand trembled."

"How do you know that?"

"Half the charge fell to the ground, and he threw aside the ramrod, not taking the time to replace it in the pistol."

"M. d'Artagnan, what you tell me is marvellous."

"It is only observation, Sire, and the commonest highwayman could do as much."

"From hearing you I can picture the whole scene."

"I have, as a matter of fact, reconstructed it in my mind with only a few changes."

"And now let us return to the dismounted cavalier. You said that he walked towards his adversary while the latter was reloading his pistol?"

"Yes, but just as he aimed the other fired."

"Oh!" said the King, "and the shot?"

"The shot was terrible, Sire. The unmounted cavalier fell forward after taking three or four tottering steps."

"Where was he hit?"

"In two places; first in his right hand, then by the same shot in the chest."

"But how could you know that?" asked the King, filled with admiration.

"Oh, it is simple enough. The butt end of the pistol was covered with blood, and traces of the bullet were visible with pieces of a broken ring. The wounded man, therefore, in all probability had the ring finger and the little finger carried off."

"So far as the hand goes I am convinced; but the chest?"

"Sire, there were two pools of blood two feet and a half apart. At one of these pools the grass was torn up by a clinched hand; at the other, the grass was simply pressed down by the weight of the body."

"Poor De Guiche!" exclaimed the King.

"Ah! was it M. de Guiche?" asked the musketeer, quietly. "I suspected it; but I did not venture to speak of it to your Majesty."

"What made you suspect it?"

"I recognized the Grammont arms on the holsters of the dead horse."

"And you think him seriously wounded?"

"Very seriously, since he fell at once and remained a long

time in the same place ; however, he was able to walk, for he left the spot, supported by two friends."

" You met him returning, then ? "

" No ; but I saw the footprints of three men. The one on the right and the one on the left walked freely and easily, but the one in the middle dragged his feet along. Besides, every footprint was marked by blood."

" Now, monsieur, since you saw the combat so well that not a single detail escaped you, tell me a little about De Guiche's adversary."

" Oh, Sire ! I do not know him."

" Yet you see everything clearly ? "

" Yes, Sire," said D'Artagnan, " I see everything, but I do not tell all I see ; and since the poor devil has escaped, your Majesty will permit me to say that I shall not denounce him."

" Yet he is guilty, monsieur, since he has fought a duel."

" Not to my mind, Sire," said D'Artagnan, coldly.

" Monsieur," cried the King, " do you fully realize what you are saying ? "

" Perfectly, Sire ; but in my eyes a man who fights a duel is a brave man. That is my opinion. Your Majesty may have another ; that would only be natural, for you are master."

" M. d'Artagnan, I ordered — "

D'Artagnan interrupted the King by a respectful gesture.

" You ordered me to find information about a combat, Sire ; you have it. If you order me to arrest M. de Guiche's adversary I will obey. But do not order me to denounce him to you, for this time I will not obey."

" Well, arrest him."

" Name him, Sire."

The King stamped his foot. Then, after a moment's reflection, he said :

" You are right — ten, twenty, a hundred times right."

" That is my opinion, Sire. I am happy that it is your Majesty's, too."

" One more word. Who helped De Guiche ? "

" I do not know."

" But you speak of two men. There was a witness, then ? "

" There was none. Furthermore, when M. de Guiche fell, his adversary fled without even giving him help."

" The wretch ! "

" The deuce, Sire, it is the result of your ordinances. The

man has fought well, has escaped one death, and wishes to escape another. He remembers M. de Boutteville."

"And so the man becomes a coward?"

"No, he becomes prudent."

"So he fled?"

"Yes, and as quickly as his horse could possibly carry him."

"In what direction?"

"Towards the château."

"Well?"

"Well, as I have had the honor of telling your Majesty, two men arrived on foot, who carried away M. de Guiche."

"What proof have you that these men arrived after the duel?"

"Ah, a very clear proof. At the moment the encounter took place the rain had just stopped. It had not had time to sink into the soil, which was still damp. The footsteps were imprinted on it. But after the duel, while M. de Guiche lay unconscious, the ground dried, and the footsteps made less of an impression."

Louis clapped his hands in admiration.

"M. d'Artagnan," said he, "you are the cleverest man in my kingdom."

"That is what M. de Richelieu thought and M. de Mazarin, Sire."

"Now it remains to be seen if your sagacity is at fault."

"Oh, Sire, a man may be mistaken! *Errare humanum est.*"

"In that case you are not human, M. d'Artagnan, for I think that you are never mistaken."

"Your Majesty said that we were going to see."

"Yes."

"In what way, if you please?"

"I have sent for M. de Manicamp and M. de Manicamp is coming."

"And M. de Manicamp knows the secret?"

"De Guiche has no secrets from M. de Manicamp."

D'Artagnan shook his head.

"No one was present at the duel, I repeat, and unless M. de Manicamp is one of the two men that brought him back —"

"Hush," said the King, "he is coming."

"Very good, Sire," said the musketeer.

At that moment Manicamp and Saint-Aignan appeared on the threshold.

CHAPTER LXIII.

THE HUNT.

THE King made an imperious gesture to the musketeer and to Saint-Aignan which signified :

" Silence, on your lives ! "

D'Artagnan, like a soldier, withdrew to a corner of the room. Saint-Aignan, like a favorite, leaned over the back of the King's chair. Manicamp, his right foot advanced, a smile on his lips, his white hands gracefully folded, advanced to make his reverence to the King. The King returned the salutation with a nod.

" Good-evening, M. de Manicamp," said he.

" Your Majesty has done me the honor to send for me," said Manicamp.

" Yes, in order to learn from you the details of the unfortunate accident which has happened to the Comte de Guiche."

" Oh, Sire, it is indeed sad."

" Were you there ? "

" Not exactly, Sire."

" But you arrived on the scene a few minutes after the accident happened ? "

" Yes, Sire, about half an hour afterwards."

" Where did it occur ? "

" I think, Sire, that the place is called the Rond-Point in the Rochin woods."

" Yes, the meeting-place of the hunt."

" Yes, Sire."

" Well, tell me what you know about the details of this unfortunate affair, M. de Manicamp."

" Perhaps your Majesty has already been informed, and I fear to weary you by a repetition."

" No, you need not be afraid."

Manicamp looked around him. He saw only D'Artagnan leaning against the wall, D'Artagnan, calm, kind, good-natured, and Saint-Aignan, with whom he had come, and who still leaned over the King's chair with an equally kind countenance. He decided, therefore, to speak.

" Your Majesty is not ignorant of the fact that accidents are common in hunting," said he.

"In hunting?"

"Yes, Sire. I mean in boar hunting."

"Ah," said the King, "so the accident happened in a boar hunt?"

"Why, yes, Sire," returned Manicamp. "Did not your Majesty know that?"

"Only in part," said the King, hastily, for Louis XIV. always hated a falsehood. "So you say the accident occurred as he was taking aim?"

"Alas, yes, Sire, unfortunately."

The King paused.

"What animal was being hunted?" he asked.

"A wild boar, Sire."

"And what could have been De Guiche's idea to go like that, all alone, to hunt a wild boar? That is a country fellow idea of sport, and fit at best for those who, unlike the Maréchal de Grammont, have no dogs or huntsmen, to hunt like a gentleman."

Manicamp shrugged his shoulders.

"Youth is rash," said he sententiously.

"Well, go on!" said the King.

"Well," continued Manicamp, not daring to hurry, but dwelling on each word, as if he were dragging his feet through a swamp, "poor De Guiche went all alone."

"All alone, really? What a fine huntsman! And does not M. de Guiche know that the wild boar always stands at bay?"

"That is just what happened, Sire."

"He knew the animal was there, then?"

"Yes, Sire, some peasants had seen it among their potatoes."

"And what kind of animal was it?"

"A short, thick one."

"You might just as well tell me, monsieur, that De Guiche had an idea of committing suicide, for I have seen him hunt, and he is an expert marksman. When he fires at an animal brought to bay and checked by the dogs, he takes every precaution, and yet he fires with a carbine; but this time he faced the boar with pistols only."

Manicamp started.

"Costly pistols, excellent to fight a duel with a man; but not with a wild boar. The devil!"

"Sire, there are some things hard to be explained."

"You are right, and this affair is one of them. Go on."

During the conversation, Saint-Aignan, who perhaps would have signed to Manicamp not to give himself away, was transfixed by the unwavering glance of the King. Communication, therefore, between himself and Manicamp was impossible. As for D'Artagnan, the statue of Silence at Athens was more noisy and more expressive than he.

Manicamp therefore continued, in the way he had begun, to sink deeper and deeper into the snare.

"Sire," said he, "this is probably how it happened. De Guiche was waiting for the boar."

"On horseback, or on foot?" asked the King.

"On horseback. He fired at the beast, and missed it."

"Clumsy fellow!"

"The animal sprang at him."

"And the horse was killed."

"Ah! your Majesty knows that?"

"I was told that a horse had been found dead at the cross-road of the Rochin woods, so I presumed that it was De Guiche's."

"It was indeed, Sire."

"Well, so much for the horse; but how about De Guiche?"

"Once down, De Guiche was attacked by the boar and wounded in his hand and chest."

"It is a horrible accident; but it must be admitted it was De Guiche's fault. How could any one have gone to hunt such an animal with pistols! He must have forgotten the fable of Adonis."

Manicamp rubbed his ear.

"That is true," said he, "it was very imprudent."

"Can you explain it, M. Manicamp?"

"Sire, what is written, is written!"

"Ah! you are a fatalist."

Manicamp was growing nervous and ill at ease.

"I am vexed with you, M. de Manicamp," continued the King.

"With me, Sire?"

"Yes, you are De Guiche's friend, you know he is subject to such acts of folly, yet you did not stop him."

Manicamp did not know what to say. The King's tone was not exactly that of a credulous man. On the other hand, it

was not particularly severe, nor did he seem to insist upon further cross-examination. It showed more raillery in it than menace.

"And you say, then," continued the King, "that it was really De Guiche's horse that was found dead?"

"Yes, indeed."

"Did that surprise you?"

"No, Sire. At the last hunt, your Majesty may remember that M. de Saint-Maure had a horse killed under him, and in the same way."

"Yes, but his was disembowelled."

"Yes, Sire."

"Had De Guiche's horse been ripped open like M. de Saint-Maure's, I should not have been surprised, *pardieu!*"

Manicamp opened his eyes wide.

"But what astonishes me," went on the King, "is that De Guiche's horse, instead of being ripped open, had his head struck."

Manicamp grew troubled.

"Am I wrong?" continued the King. "Was not De Guiche's horse struck on the temples? Confess, M. de Manicamp, that this is strange."

"Sire, you know that the horse is a very intelligent animal; this one probably tried to defend himself."

"But a horse defends himself with his hind legs, and not with his head."

"In that case the horse, terrified, may have fallen," said Manicamp, "and the boar, you understand, Sire, the boar—"

"Yes, I understand about the horse, but how about the rider?"

"Well, it is very simple. The boar returned from the horse to the rider, and, as I have already had the honor of telling your Majesty, shattered De Guiche's hand just as he was about to discharge his second pistol at him; then with a lunge of his tusk he made the hole in his chest."

"Nothing is more probable. Really, M. de Manicamp, you are wrong to trust so little to your eloquence; you can tell an admirable story."

"Your Majesty is very kind," said Manicamp, bowing in a most embarrassed manner.

"But from to-day I forbid my gentlemen to go hunting. The deuce! One might just as well allow them to fight duels."

Manicamp started and moved as if to withdraw.

"Is your Majesty satisfied?" said he.

"Delighted. But do not withdraw yet, M. de Manicamp," said Louis, "I have further business with you."

"Well, well," thought D'Artagnan, "there is another who has not our strength." And he heaved a sigh which might signify, "Oh! where are the men of our stamp now?"

At that moment an usher raised the portière and announced the King's physician.

"Ah!" exclaimed Louis, "here is M. Valot, who has just been to see M. de Guiche. Now we shall have news of the wounded man."

Manicamp felt more ill at ease than ever.

"In this way, at least," added the King, "our conscience will be clear."

And he looked at D'Artagnan, who did not move an eyelash.

CHAPTER LXIV.

THE PHYSICIAN.

M. VALOT entered.

The room presented the same appearance. The King was seated, Saint-Aignan still leaned over his chair, D'Artagnan had his back to the wall, and Manicamp was standing.

"Well, M. Valot," said the King, "did you obey me?"

"With alacrity, Sire."

"You went to your confrère's house in Fontainebleau?"

"Yes, Sire."

"And found M. de Guiche there?"

"Yes."

"In what condition? Tell me frankly."

"In a very pitiable condition, Sire."

"And yet the wild boar had not devoured him?"

"Devoured whom?"

"De Guiche."

"What wild boar?"

"The boar that wounded him."

"Was M. de Guiche hurt by a wild boar?"

"So it is said."

"By some poacher, rather."

"Some poacher?"

"Or some jealous husband or ill-used lover who, in order to avenge himself, fired at him."

"What do you say, M. Valot? Were not M. de Guiche's wounds produced by defending himself against a wild boar?"

"M. de Guiche's wounds are the result of a pistol-shot, which broke his ring-finger and the little finger of his right hand, and afterwards buried itself in the intercostal muscles of the chest."

"A bullet? Are you sure M. de Guiche was wounded by a bullet?" cried the King, pretending to be surprised.

"Indeed!" said Valot, "so sure that here it is, Sire."

And he presented to the King a half-flattened bullet.

The King looked at it, but without touching it.

"Did he have that in his chest, poor fellow?" he asked.

"Not exactly. The ball did not penetrate, but was flattened, as you see, either under the trigger of the pistol or upon the right side of the breast-bone."

"Zounds!" said the King, seriously; "you told me nothing of all this, M. de Manicamp."

"Sire —"

"What was all that story about the wild boar, the hunt by night? Come, speak!"

"Ah, Sire —"

"It seems to me that you are right," said the King, turning to his captain of musketeers, "and that there was a duel." The King more than any one else had the faculty given to the powerful of compromising and dividing his inferiors.

Manicamp darted a look full of reproach at the musketeer.

D'Artagnan understood the look, and did not wish to remain under the weight of the accusation.

He took a step forward.

"Sire," said he, "your Majesty commanded me to examine the cross-road in the Rochin woods, and to tell you what I thought had occurred there. I told you the result of my observations, out without denouncing any one. It was your Majesty yourself who first named M. de Guiche."

"Well, monsieur," said the King, haughtily, "you have done your duty and I am satisfied with you; that ought to suffice. But you, M. de Manicamp, have not done yours, for you lied to me."

"Lied, Sire? That is a hard word."

"Find another."

"Sire, I will not look for one. I have already been unfortunate enough to displease your Majesty, and I think it will be best to accept humbly the reproaches you deem proper to address to me."

"You are right, monsieur, one always displeases me by hiding from me the truth."

"Sometimes, Sire, one does not know the truth."

"No further falsehood or I double the punishment."

Manicamp bowed and grew pale.

D'Artagnan advanced a step, determined to intervene, if the still increasing anger of the King attained certain limits.

"Monsieur," continued the King, "you see that it is useless to deny the thing any longer. M. de Guiche has fought a duel."

"I do not deny it, Sire; and it would have been more generous in your Majesty not to have forced a gentleman to tell an untruth."

"Forced! Who forced you?"

"Sire, M. de Guiche is my friend; your Majesty has forbidden duelling under pain of death. A falsehood might save my friend. Therefore I told one."

"Good," murmured D'Artagnan; "he is a fine fellow, *mordoux!*"

"Monsieur," resumed the King, "instead of telling me an untruth, you should have prevented him from fighting."

"Oh, Sire! your Majesty, who is the most accomplished gentleman in France, knows well that none of us soldiers considered M. de Boutteville dishonored for having died on the Place de Grève. That which is dishonorable is to avoid one's enemy, not to meet his executioner."

"Well," said Louis XIV., "so be it; I will show you a way of repairing everything."

"If it is one suitable for a gentleman I will seize it eagerly, Sire!"

"The name of M. de Guiche's adversary!"

"Oh," murmured D'Artagnan; "are we going to have more of Louis XIII.?"

"Sire!" said Manicamp, in a tone of reproach.

"You do not wish to name him, apparently?" said the King.

"Sire, I do not know him."

"Bravo!" muttered D'Artagnan.

"M. de Manicamp, hand your sword to the captain."

Manicamp bowed gracefully, unbuckled his sword with a smile, and handed it to the musketeer.

But Saint-Aignan stepped hurriedly between him and D'Artagnan.

"Sire," said he, "with your Majesty's permission."

"Yes," said the King, perhaps delighted in his heart of hearts that some one had intervened between him and the anger to which he had given way.

"Manicamp, you are a brave fellow and the King will appreciate your conduct; but to wish to serve your friends too well is to ruin them. Manicamp, do you know the name for which his Majesty asked you?"

"Yes, I know it."

"Then you will tell it?"

"Had I felt I ought to tell it, I should already have done so."

"Then I will tell it, for, unlike you, I am not sensitive on such points of honor."

"You are free, and yet it seems to me, however —"

"Oh, a truce to magnanimity. I will not permit you to go to the Bastille in that way. Speak yourself, or I will."

Manicamp was a man of intelligence, and realized that he had done enough to produce a favorable opinion. Now it was only a question of continuing in such a way as to regain the good graces of the King.

"Speak, monsieur," said he to Saint-Aignan. "I have done everything that my conscience told me to do, and it must have spoken very decidedly," he added, turning to the King, "since it led me to disobey your Majesty's commands; but your Majesty will forgive me, I trust, when you learn that I had to preserve the honor of a lady."

"Of a lady?" asked the King in some anxiety.

"Yes, Sire."

"A lady was the cause of the duel?"

Manicamp bowed.

"If her position is sufficiently important," said he, "I shall not complain of your having acted with caution; but quite the contrary."

"Sire, everything which concerns your Majesty's household,

or the household of your Majesty's brother, is of importance in my eyes."

"In my brother's household?" repeated Louis XIV. with a slight hesitation. "The cause of the duel is a lady in my brother's household?"

"Or in Madame's."

"Ah! in Madame's?"

"Yes, Sire."

"And this lady —"

"Is one of the maids of honor in the household of her royal Highness Madame la Duchesse d'Orléans."

"For whom M. de Guiche fought, you say?"

"Yes, and this time I am not lying."

Louis made an anxious movement.

"Messieurs," said he, turning to the spectators of the scene, "kindly withdraw a moment. I must be alone with M. de Manicamp. I know that he has important things to tell me for his own justification, and that he does not dare to do it before witnesses. Put up your sword, M. de Manicamp."

Manicamp returned his sword to his belt.

"The fellow decidedly has his presence of mind," murmured the musketeer, taking Saint-Aignan by the arm and withdrawing with him.

"He will get out of it," said the latter in D'Artagnan's ear.

"And with honor, count."

Manicamp cast at Saint-Aignan and the captain a look of gratitude, which passed unnoticed by the King.

"Well," said D'Artagnan, as he crossed the threshold, "I had a bad opinion of the new generation, but I was mistaken. These young people have some good in them."

Valot preceded the favorite and the captain, leaving the King and Manicamp alone in the cabinet.

CHAPTER LXV.

IN WHICH D'ARTAGNAN RECOGNIZES THAT HE WAS MISTAKEN
AND THAT MANICAMP WAS RIGHT.

THE King, going to the door himself, made sure that no one was listening and then returned hurriedly and sat down opposite Manicamp.

"Now that we are alone, M. de Manicamp, explain yourself."

"With the greatest frankness, Sire," replied the young man.

"In the first place," said the King, "remember that I have nothing so close at heart as the honor of ladies."

"That is just the reason I tried to show that I understood your delicacy of feeling."

"Yes, I see everything now. You said that it was a question of one of my sister-in-law's maids of honor, and that the person concerned, De Guiche's adversary, the man, in short, whose name you will not give —"

"But M. de Guiche will give it, Sire."

"Yes, and you say that this man insulted some one in Madame's household?"

"Yes, Sire; Mademoiselle de la Vallière."

"Ah!" said the King, as if he had expected the name and yet as if the blow had staggered him. "Ah! it was Mademoiselle de la Vallière who was insulted."

"I do not say that she was exactly insulted, Sire."

"But —"

"I say that she was spoken of in an unbecoming manner."

"Mademoiselle de la Vallière spoken of in an unbecoming manner! And you refuse to tell me who insulted her?"

"Sire, I thought it was agreed that your Majesty had given up the idea of forcing me to denounce him?"

"That is true, you are right," said the King, controlling himself. "Besides, I shall know soon enough the name of the man whom I shall have to punish."

Manicamp saw that they had returned to the question. The King perceived that he had let himself go too far. Therefore he continued:

"And I shall punish him, not because it is a question of Mademoiselle de la Vallière, although I especially esteem her,

but because the cause of the quarrel is a lady. Now I intend that at my court ladies shall be respected, and that there shall be no quarrels concerning them."

Manicamp bowed.

"And now, M. de Manicamp," continued the King, "what was said about Mademoiselle de la Vallière?"

"Cannot your Majesty guess?"

"I?"

"Your Majesty knows very well the kind of jest in which young people permit themselves to indulge."

"They probably said that she was in love with some one?" ventured the King.

"Very likely."

"But Mademoiselle de la Vallière has a right to love any one she pleases," said the King.

"That is just what De Guiche maintained."

"And was it on that account that he fought?"

"Yes, Sire. For that alone."

The King colored.

"Do you know nothing more?" said he.

"About what, Sire?"

"Why, about the very interesting matter we are now discussing."

"What does your Majesty wish me to know?"

"Well, the name of the man whom La Vallière loves, for instance, and whom De Guiche's adversary challenged her right to love."

"Sire, I know nothing. I have heard nothing, and have learned nothing, even by accident; but I know De Guiche is a noble fellow, and if for the time being he assumed the place of La Vallière's protector, it was because that protector was of too high rank to undertake her defence himself."

These words were more than transparent — they made the King color again, but this time with pleasure.

He touched Manicamp gently on the shoulder.

"Well, you are not only an intelligent fellow, M. de Manicamp, but a brave gentleman, and your friend De Guiche is a paladin after my own heart. You will tell him this, will you not?"

"Your Majesty forgives me, then?"

"Entirely."

"And I am free?"

The King smiled, and held out his hand, which Manicamp took and kissed.

"Besides," added the King, "you are such a good storyteller."

"I, Sire?"

"You gave me an excellent account of De Guiche's accident. I can see the wild boar rush from the wood; I can see the horse fall, and the boar spring from the horse to the rider. You do not describe things, monsieur, you paint them."

"Sire, I think your Majesty is deigning to laugh at me," said Manicamp.

"On the contrary," said Louis XIV., seriously, "I am laughing so little, M. de Manicamp, that I wish you to tell this story to every one."

"The story of the hunt?"

"Yes, just as you told it to me, without changing a single word. Do you understand?"

"Perfectly, Sire."

"And you will relate it?"

"Without losing a minute."

"Very well. Now summon M. d'Artagnan. I trust you are no longer afraid of him."

"Oh, Sire, since I am assured of your Majesty's kindness I no longer fear anything."

"Call him, then," said the King.

Manicamp opened the door.

"Messieurs," said he, "the King summons you."

D'Artagnan, Saint-Aignan, and Valot returned.

"Messieurs," said the King, "I sent for you to tell you that M. de Manicamp's explanation is entirely satisfactory."

D'Artagnan glanced at Valot on the one side, and at Saint-Aignan on the other, as much as to say: "What did I tell you?"

The King drew Manicamp to the door, and in a low tone said:

"Have M. de Guiche take care of himself. Take good care that he recovers quickly. I am anxious to thank him as soon as possible in the name of all ladies, but do not let him repeat his performance."

"Were he to die a hundred deaths, Sire, he would act in the same way a hundred times if it were a question of your Majesty's honor."

The remark was forcible, but as we have said, Louis XIV. loved the incense of flattery, and provided only that it were given him, he was not very particular as to its quality.

"That is well," said he, dismissing Manicamp. "I will see De Guiche myself, and will force him to hear reason."

Manicamp withdrew backwards.

Then the King, turning to the three spectators of the scene, said :

"M. d'Artagnan?"

"Sire."

"Tell me how it happens that you were so short-sighted, you whose eyes are usually so good?"

"Short-sighted, Sire?"

"Yes."

"It must be the case, since your Majesty says so, but in what way, if you please?"

"In regard to the affair in the Rochin woods."

"Ah!"

"Yes. You saw the tracks of two horses, the footprints of two men, you described the details of a duel. Nothing of the kind occurred. It was pure imagination on your part."

"Ah!" replied D'Artagnan.

"In the same way you described the galloping of the horses and other indications of a struggle — the struggle of De Guiche with a wild boar, nothing else; only the struggle was long and terrible, apparently."

"Ah!" said D'Artagnan.

"And when I think that for a moment I believed such a story — but then you spoke with such confidence."

"As a matter of fact, Sire, I must have been short-sighted," said D'Artagnan, with a good humor that delighted the King.

"You admit it, then?"

"Gad, Sire, I am convinced of it!"

"So that now you see the thing —"

"In quite a different light from that in which I saw it half an hour ago."

"And to what, in your opinion, do you attribute this difference?"

"Oh, to a very simple thing, Sire. When I returned half an hour ago from the Rochin woods, I had to lighten me only a wretched stable lantern —"

"While now?"

"Now I have all the waxen tapers of your cabinet, and more than that, your Majesty's eyes, which shine like the sun."

The King and Saint-Aignan burst into laughter.

"It is just like M. Valot," said D'Artagnan, taking up the conversation where the King had left off. "He imagined that not only was M. de Guiche wounded by a bullet, but even that he had extracted it from his breast."

"Indeed," said Valot, "I —"

"Did you not believe that?" said D'Artagnan.

"I not only believed it," said Valot, "but at this very moment I would swear to it."

"Well, my dear doctor, you have dreamed it."

"Dreamed it?"

"M. de Guiche's wound a dream! The bullet a dream! So take my advice and talk no more about it."

"Well said!" cried the King. "D'Artagnan's advice is good. Do not speak of your dream to any one, M. Valot, and upon the honor of a gentleman, you will not repent of it. Good evening, messieurs. A wild boar hunt is a sad thing indeed."

"Very sad," repeated D'Artagnan, in a loud voice, "a wild boar hunt!"

He repeated the words in every room through which he passed, and left the château, taking Valot with him.

"Now that we are alone," said the King to Saint-Aignan, "what is the name of De Guiche's adversary?"

Saint-Aignan looked at the King.

"Oh, do not hesitate," said Louis, "you know very well that I have to forgive."

"De Wardes," said Saint-Aignan.

"Very good."

Then hastily retiring to his own room:

"To forgive is not to forget," said Louis XIV.

CHAPTER LXVI.

THE ADVANTAGE OF HAVING TWO STRINGS TO ONE'S BOW.

MANICAMP left the King's apartment delighted at having succeeded so well. On reaching the foot of the stairway he felt himself suddenly pulled by the sleeve.

He turned and recognized Montalais, who was waiting for him in the passage, and who, in a mysterious manner, leaning forward, said to him in a low tone.

"Come quickly, monsieur, I beg you."

"Where, mademoiselle?" asked Manicamp.

"A true knight would not have asked me such a question, but would have followed without need of explanation."

"Well, mademoiselle," said Manicamp, "I am ready to act like a true knight."

"No, it is too late, and you do not deserve to. We are going to Madame's! Come!"

"Ah," said Manicamp, "let us go, then."

And he followed Montalais, who ran before him as lightly as Galatea.

"This time," said Manicamp, as he followed his guide, "I do not think stories about hunting parties would be suitable. We will try, however, and if need be — well, if need be we will find something else."

Montalais still ran on ahead.

"How tiresome it is," thought Manicamp, "to need one's brains and one's legs at the same time!"

At last they reached their destination.

Madame had just finished her night toilet, and wore a most elegant dressing-gown; but it must be understood that she had made this toilet before subjecting herself to the emotion now agitating her. She was waiting with visible impatience.

Montalais and Manicamp found her standing near the door. At the sound of their steps Madame came forward.

"Ah," said she, "at last!"

"Here is M. Manicamp," said Montalais.

Manicamp bowed ceremoniously.

Madame signed to Montalais to withdraw. The young

girl obeyed. Madame followed her with her eyes in silence until the door closed, then turning to Manicamp she said:

"What is the matter, and what do I hear, M. de Manicamp? is some one wounded in the château?"

"Yes, Madame, unfortunately, M. de Guiche."

"Yes, M. de Guiche," repeated the princess. "In fact I had heard it rumored, but not confirmed. So it is really M. de Guiche who has had this misfortune?"

"Yes, Madame."

"Do you know, M. de Manicamp," said the princess, quickly, "that the King has the greatest dislike for duels?"

"Certainly, Madame, but for a duel with a wild beast one is not answerable to his Majesty."

"Oh, you will not insult me by supposing that I credit the absurd story, reported on some inexplicable reason, that M. de Guiche was wounded by a wild boar. No, no, monsieur, the truth is known, and besides the inconvenience of his wound M. de Guiche is running the risk of losing his liberty."

"Alas, Madame!" said Manicamp, "I know that well, but what is to be done?"

"Have you seen his Majesty?"

"Yes, Madame."

"What did you say to him?"

"I told him how M. de Guiche had gone hunting; how a wild boar had rushed out of the Rochin woods; how M. de Guiche had fired at it; and how finally the enraged animal had turned on De Guiche, killed the horse, and seriously wounded the rider."

"And the King believed all that?"

"Implicitly."

"Oh, you surprise me, M. de Manicamp, you surprise me greatly!"

And Madame walked up and down the room, throwing from time to time a questioning look at Manicamp, who remained impassive and motionless on the same spot. At last she stopped.

"And yet," said she, "every one here attributes this wound to another cause."

"To what cause, Madame?" said Manicamp. "May I without indiscretion ask this of your Highness?"

"You ask that? You, the intimate friend of M. de Guiche! you, his confidant!"

"Oh, Madame, his intimate friend, yes; but his confidant, no. De Guiche is a man who may have secrets, who in fact does have them; but who does not tell them. De Guiche is discreet, Madame."

"Well, in that case I shall have the pleasure of telling you the secrets which M. de Guiche keeps to himself," said Madame, spitefully, "for the King may question you a second time, and if you were to repeat the same story to him he might not be pleased with it."

"But, Madame, I think your Highness is mistaken in regard to the King. His Majesty was perfectly satisfied with me, I promise you."

"In that case permit me to say to you, M. de Manicamp, that that proves only one thing: that his Majesty is very easily satisfied."

"I think your Highness is wrong in holding this opinion. His Majesty is known as a man not satisfied except with very good reason."

"And do you suppose he will be pleased with your officious falsehood when he learns to-morrow that M. de Guiche had, on behalf of his friend, M. de Bragelonne, a quarrel which ended in a duel?"

"A quarrel for M. de Bragelonne?" said Manicamp, with the most innocent expression in the world. "What is your Highness doing me the honor to tell me?"

"What is there surprising in that? M. de Guiche is super-sensitive, irritable, and easily provoked."

"On the contrary, Madame, I think M. de Guiche is very patient, and never super-sensitive or irritable except on very good grounds."

"Is not friendship a just ground?" asked the princess.

"Oh, certainly, Madame, and particularly for a man like him."

"Well, M. de Bragelonne is a friend of M. de Guiche; you will not deny that?"

"A very great friend."

"Well, M. de Guiche took M. de Bragelonne's part, and as M. de Bragelonne was absent and could not fight, he fought for him."

Manicamp began to smile, and shrugged his shoulders two

or three times, as much as to say : "The deuce ! if you absolutely insist —"

"Well," said the princess, impatiently, "speak !"

"I ?"

"Yes, you. It is evident that you do not agree with me, and that you have something to say."

"I have only one thing to say, Madame."

"Say it."

"I do not understand one word of what you have done me the honor of saying to me."

"What ! you do not understand a word about this quarrel between M. de Guiche and M. de Wardes ?" cried the princess, on the verge of losing her temper.

Manicamp was silent.

"A quarrel," she continued, "caused by a conversation, more or less malicious, more or less well-founded, in regard to the virtue of a certain lady."

"Ah, of a certain lady ? That is quite another thing," said Manicamp.

"You are beginning to understand, are you not ?"

"Your Highness will excuse me, but I dare not —"

"You dare not," said Madame, exasperated. "Very well, wait a moment, I shall dare."

"Madame ! Madame !" cried Manicamp, as if bewildered, "be careful of what you are going to say."

"Ah, it would seem that if I were a man you would fight with me, notwithstanding his Majesty's edicts, as M. de Guiche fought with M. de Wardes on account of the virtue of Mademoiselle de la Vallière."

"Of Mademoiselle de la Vallière !" cried Manicamp, starting back suddenly as though he had not had the least idea of hearing that name uttered.

"Oh, what is the matter, M. de Manicamp, that you jump so ?" said Madame, ironically. "Would you have the impertinence to question the virtue of this girl ?"

"But there's not the least question in all this affair of Mademoiselle de la Vallière's virtue, Madame."

"What ! when two men blow each other's brains out for a woman, you say that she has nothing at all to do with the affair, and that there is no question at all of her ? I did not think you so good a courtier, M. de Manicamp."

"I beg your pardon, Madame," said the young man, "but we

are far from understanding each other. You do me the honor to speak one language and I apparently am speaking another."

"I beg your pardon."

"I thought I understood your Highness to say that MM. de Guiche and de Wardes fought on account of Mademoiselle de la Vallière?"

"Yes, yes."

"On account of Mademoiselle de la Vallière, was it not?" repeated Manicamp.

"Oh, I do not say that M. de Guiche took a personal interest in Mademoiselle de la Vallière, but that he was acting on behalf of another."

"On behalf of another!"

"Come, stop playing the part of a man bewildered. Is it not known here that M. de Bragelonne is affianced to Mademoiselle de la Vallière, and that when he left for London on the mission with which the King entrusted him he charged his friend, M. de Guiche, to watch over that interesting young girl?"

"There is nothing more for me to say, then. Your Highness is thoroughly informed."

"Of everything, I assure you."

Manicamp began to laugh, which exasperated the princess beyond measure. As we know, she had not a very patient disposition.

"Madame," said the discreet Manicamp, bowing, "let us bury the whole affair, for it will never be entirely cleared up."

"Oh, so far as that goes there is nothing further to be done. My information is complete. The King will learn that De Guiche has taken up the cause of this little adventuress who assumes all the airs of a great lady. He will learn that M. de Bragelonne having appointed his friend M. de Guiche guardian in ordinary of the Garden of the Hesperides, the latter immediately seized upon the Marquis de Wardes, who ventured to lay his hand upon the golden apple. Now you cannot fail to know, M. de Manicamp, you who know everything, that the King for his part covets this great treasure, and that perhaps he will be displeased with M. de Guiche for constituting himself its defender. Are you sufficiently informed now, or do you want to know something further? Tell me."

"No, Madame, there is nothing further I wish to know."

"Learn, however, for you must know this, M. de Manicamp,

that his Majesty's indignation will be followed by terrible results. In princes with temperaments like that of his Majesty the lover's anger is a tempest."

"Which you will calm, Madame."

"I!" exclaimed the princess with a strongly ironical gesture, "I! and in what capacity?"

"As an enemy of injustice, Madame."

"And it would be an injustice according to you to prevent the King from arranging his own love affairs?"

"You will intercede, however, on behalf of M. de Guiche."

"You are mad, monsieur," said the princess, haughtily.

"On the contrary, Madame, I am in full possession of my senses and I repeat that you will defend M. de Guiche to the King."

"I?"

"Yes."

"Why so?"

"Because M. de Guiche's cause is your own, Madame," said Manicamp fervently, in a low tone. And his eyes brightened.

"What do you mean?"

"I say, Madame, that, in regard to the defence undertaken by M. de Guiche in M. de Bragelonne's absence, I am surprised that your Highness has not detected a pretext in the use of La Vallière's name."

"A pretext?"

"Yes."

"But a pretext for what?" stammered the princess, whom Manicamp's look had just enlightened.

"Now, Madame," said the young man, "I have said enough, I presume, to induce your Highness not to accuse before the King this poor De Guiche, upon whom will fall all the pent-up wrath of a party bitterly opposed to your own."

"You mean, on the contrary, I suppose, that all those who do not care for Mademoiselle de la Vallière, and perhaps even some of those who do care for her, will be angry with the count?"

"Oh, Madame, will you push your obstinacy so far and refuse to listen to the words of a devoted friend? Must I expose myself to the risk of displeasing you? Must I, in spite of myself, name the person who was the real cause of this quarrel?"

"The person?" said Madame, blushing.

"Must I," continued Manicamp, "tell you how poor De Guiche became irritated, furious, exasperated at all the reports

now circulated about this person? Must I, — if you persist in being obstinate enough not to see my meaning, and if respect continues to prevent my naming her, — must I recall to you Monsieur's scenes with my Lord de Buckingham and the insinuations concerning the duke's exile? Must I remind you of the count's duty to please, to watch over, to protect this person, for whom alone he lives, for whom alone he breathes? Well, I shall do so, and when I shall have recalled everything to your mind perhaps you will understand that the count, his patience taxed beyond endurance, having been harassed for some time by De Wardes, fired up at the first disrespectful word the latter uttered about this lady, and panted for vengeance."

The princess hid her face in her hands.

"Monsieur, monsieur!" cried she, "do you know what you are saying, and to whom you are speaking?"

"And so, Madame," continued Manicamp, as if he had not heard the exclamations of the princess, "nothing will astonish you now, neither the count's ardor in seeking this quarrel, nor his marvellous tact in transferring it to a quarter where your interests would not suffer. That especially shows skill and coolness, and if the person for whom the Comte de Guiche fought and shed his blood really owes some gratitude to the poor wounded man, it is not indeed on account of the blood lost or the pain felt, but for the steps he has taken in regard to the honor of one, an honor more precious to him than his own."

"Oh!" cried Madame, as if she were alone. "Oh, was it really for me?"

Manicamp could pause a moment. He had bravely won a respite. He breathed again.

Madame for her part remained for some time absorbed in a sad reverie. Her agitation was apparent from her quick breathing, from the languor of her eyes, from the frequency with which she pressed her hand to her heart. With her, coquetry was not an inert quality, but a fire which was always seeking fuel and which found it.

"Well," said she, "the count will have obliged two persons at the same time, for M. de Bragelonne also owes much gratitude to M. de Guiche, and with far greater reason, inasmuch as everywhere and always Mademoiselle de la Vallière will be regarded as having been defended by this generous champion."

Manicamp realized that there was still some doubt in the princess's heart, and his mind was sharpened by the resistance.

"A great service, in truth," said he, "the one he rendered Mademoiselle de la Vallière! A great service to M. de Bragelonne! The duel has created a sensation which is somewhat of a disgrace to this young girl; a sensation which necessarily will embroil her with the vicomte. The consequence is that De Wardes' bullet has had three results instead of one. It destroys at the same time the honor of a woman, the happiness of a man, and perhaps has wounded to the death one of the best gentlemen in France. Oh, Madame, your logic is very cold. It always condemns, it never absolves."

Manicamp's last words broke down the last doubt, not only in the heart, but in the mind of Madame. She was no longer a princess with her scruples, nor a woman with ever-recurrent suspicions, but one whose heart had just felt the mortal chill of a stab.

"Wounded to the death!" she gasped. "Oh, Monsieur de Manicamp, did you say 'wounded to the death'?"

Manicamp's only answer was a deep sigh.

"And so you say the count is dangerously wounded," continued the princess.

"One of his hands is shattered, Madame, and he has a bullet in his chest."

"Great God!" exclaimed the princess, in feverish excitement, "this is frightful, M. de Manicamp. A hand shattered, you say? A bullet in his chest? Oh, my God! And that coward, that wretch, that assassin De Wardes did it! Heaven is not just."

Manicamp seemed a prey to violent emotion. He had in short displayed much energy in the latter part of his defence.

Madame no longer thought of conventionalities; when passion or anger or sympathy spoke in her, nothing could restrain her. She approached Manicamp, who had sunk upon a chair as if his grief were a sufficiently powerful excuse for an infraction of the laws of etiquette.

"Monsieur," said she, taking his hand, "be frank with me."

Manicamp raised his head.

"Is M. de Guiche in danger of death?"

"Doubly so, Madame. In the first place because of the hemorrhage which has taken place, an artery in the hand having been injured; then because of the bullet in his chest, which the doctor fears may have injured some vital organ."

"Then he may die?"

"Yes, die, Madame, and without even the consolation of knowing that you have heard of his devotion."

"You must tell him."

"I?"

"Yes. Are you not his friend?"

"I? Oh, no, Madame. I shall tell M. de Guiche, if the poor man is still in a condition to hear me, only what I have seen, and that is your cruelty towards him."

"Oh, monsieur, you would not do anything so inhuman?"

"Yes, Madame, I must speak the truth, for nature is strong in a man of his age. The physicians are clever, and if by chance the poor count should survive this, I should not wish him to be exposed to dying from a wound of the heart after having escaped a wound of the body."

At these words Manicamp rose, and, with a low bow, seemed anxious to take leave.

"At least, monsieur," said Madame, stopping him with almost a suppliant air, "you will be kind enough to tell me the condition of the patient. Who is the physician attending him?"

"He is very ill, Madame. His doctor is M. Valot, his Majesty's private physician. The latter is assisted by a confrère, to whose house M. de Guiche has been carried."

"What! He is not in the château?" said Madame.

"Alas, Madame, the poor fellow was so ill that he could not be brought here."

"Give me the address, monsieur," said the princess, hurriedly. "I shall send to ask after him."

"Rue du Feurre; a brick house with white shutters. The doctor's name is on the door."

"Are you going back to the patient, M. de Manicamp?"

"Yes, Madame."

"In that case you will do me a favor."

"I am at your Highness's orders."

"Do what you intended to do; return to M. de Guiche, dismiss those who are with him, and be kind enough to go away yourself."

"Madame —"

"Let us waste no time in useless explanations. Such are the facts. See in it nothing except what is there, and ask nothing beyond what I tell you. I am going to send one of

my ladies, perhaps two, because it is late. I do not wish them to see you, or, frankly, I do not want you to see them. These are scruples you can understand — you particularly, M. de Manicamp, who divine everything."

"Oh, Madame, perfectly. I can even do better. I shall walk in advance of your messengers. This will at the same time be the means of showing them the way and of protecting them if they should need, which is not likely, any protection."

"And then by this means they could enter without any difficulty, could they not?"

"Yes, Madame, for I would go in first and remove any difficulties that might chance to exist."

"Very well; go, M. de Manicamp, and wait at the foot of the staircase."

"Yes, Madame."

"Stay a moment."

Manicamp paused.

"When you hear the footsteps of two women descending the stairs, go out, and without turning around, follow the road which leads to the poor count."

"But if by any mischance two other persons were to come down and I were to be mistaken in them?"

"They will clap their hands together softly three times."

"Yes, Madame."

"Go, now."

Manicamp turned round, bowed a last time, and left with joy in his heart. He knew, too, that the presence of Madame would be the best balm to apply to the patient's wounds.

A quarter of an hour had not elapsed before the sound of a door opening and shutting carefully reached him. Then he heard light steps gliding down the stairs; then three claps, the signal agreed on.

Manicamp, faithful to his promise, at once went out, and without looking around started through the streets of Fontainebleau towards the doctor's dwelling.

CHAPTER LXVII.

M. MALICORNE, KEEPER OF THE RECORDS OF FRANCE.

Two women wrapped in their cloaks, the upper portion of their faces hidden behind black velvet masks, timidly followed Manicamp's steps.

On the first floor of a room, behind curtains of red damask, shone the soft light of a lamp placed on a low table. At the other end of the room on a bed supported by spiral columns, and hung with curtains like those which deadened the light of the lamp, lay De Guiche, his head raised on two pillows, his eyes bathed in thick mist. His long black curly hair, spread over the pillows, set off by their disorder the young man's dry, pale temples. One realized that fever was the chief occupant of the room. De Guiche was dreaming. Through shadows his mind was following one of those dreams of delirium which God sends along the road of death to those about to fall into the strange void of eternity.

Two or three drops of fresh blood still stained the floor.

Manicamp hurriedly ran up the stairs, but paused at the threshold, gently pushed open the door, peered into the room, and seeing that everything was quiet, he advanced on tiptoe towards the great leathern armchair, a specimen of furniture of the time of Henri IV., and seeing that the nurse had, of course, fallen asleep, he awoke her and asked her to go into the next room.

Then standing by the side of the bed, he remained for a moment wondering whether he ought to awaken De Guiche and tell him the good news.

But since he was beginning to hear the rustle of silken robes outside the door, as well as the hard breathing of his two companions, and since he already saw the portière impatiently raised, he passed around the bed and followed the nurse into the adjoining room.

As soon as he had disappeared the curtain was raised and the two women entered the room he had just left. The one who entered first made an imperious gesture to her companion, which apparently riveted the latter to a stool near the door.

Advancing firmly towards the bed, the lady drew back the curtains along the iron pole and threw their thick folds behind the head-board. Then she saw the pale face of the count; she saw his right hand, wrapped in linen of dazzling whiteness, outlined against the counterpane figured with dark leaves which covered a portion of the bed of pain. She shuddered on seeing a drop of blood which grew larger upon the linen bandage.

The young man's white breast was uncovered, as though for the cool night air to aid his breathing. A narrow band fastened the dressings of the wound, around which a bluish circle of extravasated blood was increasing in size. A deep sigh escaped the lips of the young woman. She leaned against the column of the bed and through the holes in her mask gazed at this sad sight.

A hoarse, harsh groan passed like a death rattle through the count's set teeth. The masked lady seized the patient's left hand, which burned like glowing coals.

But the instant she passed her icy hand on it, the effect was such that De Guiche opened his eyes and strove to return to life by animating his glance. The first thing he saw was the phantom standing by his bedside. At sight of that his eyes dilated, but without any look of intelligence brightening them.

Thereupon the lady signed to her companion, who had remained near the door. No doubt the latter had learned her lesson, for in a clear, firm voice, without any hesitation, she pronounced these words:

"M. le Comte, her royal Highness Madame wants to know how you bear the pain of your wound, and to express to you by my lips her deep regret at seeing you suffer."

At the word "Madame," De Guiche started; he had not as yet noticed the person to whom the voice belonged. He naturally turned in the direction from which it came. But as the cold hand had not left his, he turned again to gaze at the motionless figure.

"Was it you who spoke to me, madame?" he asked in a weak voice. "Or is there some one else with you in the room?"

"Yes," replied the phantom, in an almost unintelligible voice as she bent her head.

"Well," said the patient, with an effort, "thank you. Tell

Madame that I no longer regret dying since she has remembered me."

At the word "dying," pronounced by one so near death, the masked lady could not restrain the tears which rolled down her cheeks under her mask.

If De Guiche had been in fuller possession of his senses he would have seen the tears drop on his bed like shining pearls.

The lady, forgetting that she wore a mask, raised her hand to dry her eyes, and coming into contact with the rough cold velvet she tore it off angrily and threw it upon the floor.

At the unexpected sight before him which seemed to issue from a cloud De Guiche gave a cry and stretched out his arms. But all words died on his lips, and all strength left him. His right hand, which had followed his first impulse without calculating its amount of strength, fell back upon the bed, and immediately afterwards the white bandage was stained with a larger spot.

Meanwhile the young man's eyes grew dim and closed as if he had already begun the struggle with the invincible Angel of Death. Then after a few involuntary movements his head fell back motionless on the pillow. His face had become livid.

The lady was frightened, but this time, contrary to custom, fear drew her. She leaned over the young man, gazing at his pale, cold face which she almost touched; then she suddenly imprinted a kiss upon the left hand of De Guiche, who, thrilled as by an electric shock, rallied a second time, opened wide his unseeing eyes, and again fell back unconscious.

"Come," said she to her companion, "we cannot remain here any longer. I shall do something foolish."

"Madame, Madame, your Highness is forgetting your mask."

"Pick it up," replied her mistress, as she glided distracted to the staircase.

As the outer door had been left half open the two birds of passage sped through it, and with rapid steps returned to the palace. One of them ascended to Madame's apartments, where she disappeared.

The other entered the apartments of the maids of honor on the entresol. Having reached her room, she sat down before

a table, and, without giving herself time to breathe, wrote the following letter :

"This evening Madame has been to see M. de Guiche. Everything is going well on this side. Look out for yours, and above all burn this paper."

Then she folded the letter lengthwise, and leaving her room with every precaution, she crossed a corridor which led to the apartments of the gentlemen in Monsieur's service. She stopped before a door under which, after knocking three times, she slipped the paper ; then she fled.

Returning to her own room, she destroyed every trace of her nocturnal excursion, and of the writing of the note.

In the midst of the occupation to which she was devoting herself with the aforesaid object in view she saw on the table Madame's mask, which, according to her mistress's directions, she had brought back with her, but which she had forgotten to return to its owner.

"Oh," said she, "I must not forget to do to-morrow what I have forgotten to-day."

She took the mask by its velvet cheek, and feeling her thumb damp she looked at it. It was not only damp, but red. The mask had fallen upon one of the spots of blood which, as we have said, stained the floor, and from the black velvet exterior had soaked through to the white cambric lining.

"Oh! oh!" exclaimed Montalais, for our readers have no doubt already recognized her from the various manoeuvres we have described. "I shall not give back the mask now, it is too precious;" and rising she ran towards a maple-wood box which contained several toilet articles and some perfumery.

"No, not here," said she, "such a treasure is not a thing which one leaves exposed to chance."

Then after a moment's silence, and with a smile that was peculiarly her own, she said :

"Beautiful mask, stained with the blood of that brave chevalier, you shall be added to that wonderful collection of La Vallière's and Raoul's letters, that loving collection indeed which will some day form a part of the history of France and the history of royalty. You shall go to M. Malicorne," continued Montalais, laughing, as she began to undress, "to that

worthy M. Malicorne," said she, blowing out her candle, "who thinks he was made only to be master of Monsieur's apartments, and whom I shall make Keeper of the Records and Historiographer of the House of Bourbon and of the first houses of the kingdom. Let him complain now, that cross old Malicorne!"

And she drew her curtains and fell asleep.

CHAPTER LXVIII.

THE JOURNEY.

THE following day having been agreed upon for the departure, the King, at eleven o'clock, with the queens and Madame, descended the great stairway to his coach, drawn by six spirited horses.

His suite in travelling costumes was waiting in the horse-shoe court.

It was a brilliant spectacle, — this retinue of riding horses, and coaches, and men, and women, surrounded by their attendants, servants, and pages. The King entered his coach with the two queens. Madame drove with Monsieur. The maids of honor followed their example and took their places, two by two, in the coaches assigned them.

That of the King started first, then came Madame's followed by the others, according to rank.

The weather was warm; a light breeze which had been thought strong enough in the morning to cool the air, soon became heated by the sun, which was hidden by the clouds, and no longer filtered through the warm vapor which rose from the ground, like a scorching wind blowing particles of fine dust in the faces of the travellers.

Madame was the first to complain of the heat. Monsieur replied by throwing himself back in the coach like a man about to faint, inundating himself with salts and perfumes, and uttering deep sighs the while. Whereupon Madame said to him with her most amiable expression:

"Really, Monsieur, I thought that on account of the heat you would be gallant enough to leave the coach to me, and to make the journey yourself on horseback."

"On horseback!" cried the prince, with an accent of amazement which showed how far he was from following the strange suggestion; "on horseback! You cannot be thinking of such a thing, Madame! My skin would peel off if exposed to this scorching breeze."

Madame began to laugh.

"You might take my parasol," said she.

"And the trouble of holding it as well," replied Monsieur, with the greatest coolness. "Besides, I have no horse."

"No horse?" replied the princess, who, if she had not gained the desired isolation had at least the amusement of teasing, "you are mistaken, Monsieur, for I see your favorite bay yonder."

"My favorite bay!" cried the prince, trying to reach the door, a movement which caused him so much discomfort that he hastened to resume his immobility.

"Yes," said Madame, "your horse led by M. de Malicorne."

"Poor beast!" replied the prince. "How warm it must be!"

And with these words he closed his eyes like a man about to die. Madame on her side leaned back indolently in the other corner of the coach and closed her eyes too, not to sleep, however, but to think at her ease.

In the meantime the King, on the front seat of his carriage, the back of which he had given up to the two queens, felt that feverish contrariety of anxious lovers who, always without ever quenching their ardent thirst, desire to see the loved object and then to go away half satisfied without perceiving that they have acquired a greater thirst than ever. The King, who, as we have said, led the procession, could not from where he sat see the coaches of the ladies and the maids of honor who followed. Besides, he had to answer the eternal questions of the young Queen, who, happy to have with her "*her dear*" husband, as she called him, forgetting the royal etiquette, invested him with all her love, covered him with attentions, fearing that some one might take him from her, or that he might want to leave.

Anne of Austria, occupied with nothing just then beyond the dull pain which every now and then she felt in her breast, looked pleased, and, although she guessed the King's impatience, mischievously prolonged his sufferings by unexpectedly

resuming the conversation just as the King, absorbed in his own thoughts, was beginning to think over his secret attachment. All this, the attentions of the Queen, the teasing of Anne of Austria, ended by becoming unbearable to the King, who did not know how to control the longings of his heart.

He complained first of the heat, which was merely a prelude to other complaints, but he did it with sufficient tact to throw Maria Teresa off the track. Taking what he said literally, she began to fan him with her ostrich plumes.

But the heat passed away, and Louis began to complain of cramps and stiffness in his limbs, and as the coach stopped to change horses the Queen said:

"Do you want me to get out with you? My limbs are tired too. We can walk a little, then the coach will overtake us and we can get into it again."

The King frowned. It is a hard test to which a jealous woman puts her faithless husband, when, although herself a prey to jealousy, she watches herself so carefully that she gives no pretext for anger.

Nevertheless the King could not refuse; he accepted her offer, stepped from the carriage, gave his arm to the Queen, and walked a short distance with her, while the horses were being changed. As he walked along he threw an envious glance at the courtiers, who were fortunate enough to have come on horseback.

The Queen soon saw that walking pleased the King no more than driving. She asked, therefore, to be taken back to the carriage.

The King led her to the door, but did not get in with her. He walked back a few steps and looked along the line of coaches for the one in which he took so lively an interest. At the door of the sixth appeared La Vallière's fair face.

As the King stood motionless, lost in thought, without noticing that everything was ready and that they were waiting only for him, he heard a few feet away a voice addressing him in the most respectful tone. It was M. Malicorne, in the complete costume of an equerry, holding over his left arm the bridles of two horses.

"Your Majesty asked for a horse?" said he.

"A horse! Have you one of my horses?" asked the King,

trying to remember the gentleman, whose face was not yet familiar to him.

"Sire," replied Malicorne, "I have at least a horse which is at your Majesty's service."

And Malicorne pointed to Monsieur's bay which Madame had observed. It was a superb creature nicely caparisoned.

"But that is not one of my horses, monsieur," said Louis.

"Sire, it is from his royal Highness's stables. But his royal Highness does not ride when it is so warm."

The King made no reply, but hastily approached the horse, which was pawing the ground.

Malicorne sprang forward to hold the stirrup, but his Majesty was already in the saddle.

Restored to good humor by this fortunate chance, the King rode smilingly to the coach of the ladies, who were waiting for him, and in spite of Maria Teresa's preoccupied manner, said:

"I have found this horse and am going to take advantage of it. I was stifled in the coach. Au revoir, mesdames."

Then bending gracefully over the curved neck of his mount, he disappeared.

Anne of Austria leaned out to look after him. He did not go far, but having reached the sixth carriage, he reined in his horse and took off his hat.

He saluted La Vallière, who at sight of him gave a little cry of surprise, at the same time blushing with pleasure. Montalais, who occupied the other seat of the coach, made the King a low bow. Then, like a tactful woman, she pretended to be very much occupied with the landscape, and withdrew into the far corner.

The conversation between the King and La Vallière began like the conversation of all lovers, by eloquent looks and by a few words devoid of sense. The King explained how warm he had felt in his carriage, so much so that a horse seemed a blessing to him.

"And," he added, "my benefactor is a very intelligent man, for he seemed to know just what I wanted. Now, I have one further wish, and that is to know the gentleman who so cleverly served his King and extricated him from the tiresome position in which he was."

During this colloquy, the first words of which had roused

lier, Montalais leaned over in such a way as to meet the King's glance as he finished his remark.

The result was that Louis looked as much at her as at La Vallière, and she could suppose that it was she to whom the question was put, and consequently the one who might be allowed to answer; therefore she said:

"Sire, the horse your Majesty is riding is one of Monsieur's which was led by one of his royal Highness's gentlemen."

"And what is the gentleman's name, if you please, mademoiselle?"

"M. de Malicorne, Sire."

The name produced its usual effect.

"Malicorne?" repeated the King, smiling.

"Yes, Sire," replied Aure. "See, it is the gentleman galloping at my left," and she pointed out Malicorne, who with a pious air was riding by the side of the coach, knowing very well they were talking of him at that very moment, but showing that he knew it no more than as if he were deaf and dumb.

"Yes," said the King, "he is the one; I remember his face and his name," and Louis glanced tenderly at La Vallière.

Aure had nothing further to do. She had let fall Malicorne's name, the soil was good; there was nothing left but to let the name grow and the event to bear fruit. Consequently she threw herself back in her corner, feeling she had the right to make to M. de Malicorne as many agreeable signs as she could, since M. de Malicorne had had the good fortune to please the King. As will be readily understood, Montalais was not wrong, and Malicorne, with his quick ear and sly look, interpreted the words:

"All goes well," the whole being accompanied by a pantomimic action which contained the semblance of a kiss.

"Alas, mademoiselle," said the King at last, "the liberty of the country is about to cease. Your duties with Madame will be more rigorous, and we shall not see you any more."

"Your Majesty is too fond of Madame," replied Louise, "not to come often to see her, and when your Majesty passes through the room —"

"Ah!" said the King, tenderly, as he gradually lowered his tone, "to perceive is not to see, and yet this apparently would be enough for you."

Louise did not answer. A sigh filled her heart, but she stifled it.

"You have great control over yourself," said the King.

La Vallière smiled sadly.

"Use the strength in loving," he continued, "and I shall bless God for having given it to you."

La Vallière was silent, but raised on the King eyes full of love.

Then as if devoured by that burning glance, Louis passed his hand across his forehead, and pressing both knees against his horse, made him bound several steps forward. La Vallière leaning back with eyes half closed gazed at the handsome rider, whose plumes swayed in the breeze. She admired his gracefully rounded figure; his limbs delicate and nervous, pressed against the horse's sides; the regular profile outlined by his beautiful blonde curls, revealing occasionally his small, well-formed ear. In fact, the poor girl was in love, and delighted in the fact.

After a moment the King returned to her side.

"Oh," said he, "do you not see how your silence pierces my heart? Oh, mademoiselle, how pitiless you would be if you resolved to break off with any one; and then, I think you changeable. In fact, I fear this great love which I have for you."

"Oh, Sire, you are mistaken!" said La Vallière, "if I ever love, it will be for always."

"If you will ever love!" cried the King, sadly. "What! you do not love now, then?"

She hid her face in her hands.

"You see," said the King, "that I am right in accusing you; you see you are changeable, capricious, a coquette perhaps!"

"Oh, no," said she, "reassure yourself, Sire; no, no, no!"

"Promise me, then, that you will always be the same to me."

"Oh, always, Sire."

"That you will never show any of that severity which breaks people's hearts, any of that sudden change of feeling which would kill me."

"No! oh, no!"

"Well listen. I like promises. I like to place under the guarantee of an oath, that is, under the protection of God, everything which interests my heart and my love. Promise me, or rather swear to me, that if, in the life we are about to

take up, — a life full of sacrifices, of mysteries, of grief, of disappointments and misunderstandings — swear to me that if we deceive or misunderstand each other, if we make mistakes, and that would be a crime in love, — swear to me, Louise — ”

She shook in every limb. It was the first time she had heard her name thus uttered by her royal lover.

Louis took off his glove and held out his hand.

“Swear to me,” he continued, “that in all our quarrels, never shall we let one night pass by, if we have had any misunderstanding, without a visit or at least a message from one of us to bring consolation and rest to the other.”

La Vallière took between her icy hands the burning hand of her lover, and pressed it gently, until a movement of the horse, frightened by the noise and proximity of the wheels, snatched its rider from this happiness.

She had sworn.

“Return, Sire,” then said she, “return to the queens. I foresee a storm yonder which threatens my peace of mind.”

Louis obeyed, saluted Mademoiselle de Montalais, and galloped away to rejoin the Queen's coach. As he passed Monsieur he saw that the latter was asleep.

Madame, however, was not. She said to the King :

“What a fine horse, Sire! Is it not Monsieur's bay?”

The young Queen merely remarked :

“Do you feel better, my dear Sire?”

CHAPTER LXIX.

WOMAN'S TRIUMPH.

ONCE in Paris, the King attended meetings and worked during a part of the day. The Queen remained in her apartments with the queen mother, and did nothing but weep after she had said good-bye to Louis.

“Ah, mother, the King no longer loves me. Alas! What will become of me?”

“A husband always loves such a woman as you,” replied Anne of Austria.

"The time may come, mother, when he will love some other woman."

"What do you mean by love?"

"Oh, always thinking of one person, and always wanting to be with her."

"Have you noticed that the King does that sort of thing?" asked Anne of Austria.

"No, Madame," said the young Queen, hesitatingly.

"You see very well, Maria!"

"And yet, mother, you must admit that the King neglects me."

"The King, my daughter, belongs to his whole kingdom."

"And that is why he no longer belongs to me. That is why I shall be in the position of so many queens, deserted and neglected, while love, glory, and honor are for others. Oh, mother, the King is so handsome! How many will say they love him! how many must love him!"

"It is seldom that women love the man in the King. But if such should be the case, and I doubt it, Maria, wish rather that these women may really care for your husband. In the first place the devoted love of a woman is an element of rapid dissolution for the love of the lover; and then by force of loving, the mistress loses all influence over the lover, whose power and wealth she does not wish, but who wishes his love. Wish, therefore, that the King may not love, and that his mistress may love him much!"

"Oh, mother, what power there is in deep love!"

"Yet you say you are deserted."

"That is true, I was wrong. But, mother, there is one thing I could not stand."

"What is that?"

"A happy choice, a household beside our own, a family he may have by another woman. Oh, if ever I were to see children other than mine that belonged to him, I should die!"

"Maria! Maria!" replied the queen mother, with a smile, as she took the young Queen's hand, "remember what I am going to say, and let it always be a consolation to you: The King cannot have a dauphin without you, yet you could have one without him."

At these words, which she accompanied with an expressive laugh, the queen mother left her daughter-in-law and went to see Madame, whose arrival in the large cabinet had just been announced by a page.

Madame had scarcely taken time to undress. She showed an agitated face, which betrayed a project she was planning in her mind, the result of which troubled her.

"I came to see," said she, "if your Majesties felt any fatigue from our little journey?"

"None at all," said the queen mother.

"A little," said Maria Teresa.

"I, mesdames, have been troubled on one account."

"What account?" asked Anne of Austria.

"The fatigue the King must have felt from riding horseback as he did."

"That does the King good."

"And I suggested it to him myself," said Maria Teresa, turning pale.

Madame made no reply; but one of her own peculiar smiles appeared on her lips without passing to the rest of her face. Then at once changing the conversation she remarked:

"We shall find Paris the same as we left it: always full of intrigues, plots, flirtations."

"Intrigues! What intrigues?" asked the queen mother.

"A great deal is said about M. Fouquet and Madame Plessis-Bellière."

"Who in that way raises the number to ten thousand!" replied the queen mother. "But the plots, if you please!"

"We have trouble with Holland, apparently."

"How so?"

"Monsieur told me about the medals."

"Ah!" cried the young Queen, "the medals coined in Holland, on which is a cloud passing over the sun of the King. You are wrong to call that a plot; it is an insult."

"So contemptible that the King ignores it," replied the queen mother. "But what were you saying about flirtations? Did you mean to refer to Madame d'Olonne?"

"Oh, no, I was thinking of some one nearer home."

"*Casa de usted,*"¹ murmured the queen mother into her daughter's ear, but without moving her lips. Madame heard nothing and continued:

"Do you know the frightful news?"

"Oh, yes, M. de Guiche's wound."

"And you, like every one else, attribute it to an accident he met with in hunting?"

¹ "In your house."

"Why, yes," said both queens, interested this time. Madame drew near.

"There was a duel," said she, in a low tone.

"Ah!" said Anne of Austria, severely, in whose ears the word "duel," forbidden in France since she had reigned, sounded ill.

"A deplorable duel which came very near costing Monsieur two of his best friends, and the King two good servants."

"What was the cause of it?" asked the young Queen, animated by some secret instinct.

"Flirtations," repeated Madame, triumphantly. "The gentlemen were discussing the virtue of a lady; one thought that Pallas was nothing beside her; the other claimed that the lady resembled Venus inciting Mars; and the gentlemen certainly fought like Hector and Achilles."

"Venus inciting Mars?" said the young Queen in a low tone, not daring to ask for an explanation of the allegory.

"Who is the lady?" asked Anne of Austria, sharply.

"You said, I believe, that she was a maid of honor."

"Did I?" said Madame.

"Yes, I thought I heard you say who it was."

"Do you know that such a woman is fatal to a royal house?"

"Is it Mademoiselle de la Vallière?" said the queen mother.

"Yes, it is indeed that ugly little thing."

"I thought she was affianced to a gentleman who is neither — as I suppose — M. de Guiche nor M. de Wardes."

"That is possible, Madame."

The young Queen took up a piece of embroidery, which she began to unrip with affected calm, a calm belied by the shaking of her fingers.

"What were you saying of Venus and of Mars?" pursued the queen mother; "is there a *Mars*?"

"She boasts of one."

"You say she boasts of one?"

"That was the cause of the duel."

"And M. de Guiche supported the cause of Mars?"

"Yes, certainly, like a good servant."

"A good servant!" cried the young Queen, forgetting all reserve in giving vent to her jealousy; "servant of whom?"

"Of Mars," replied Madame. "Unable to be defended except at the expense of this Venus, M. de Guiche upheld the

absolute innocence of Mars, and no doubt affirmed that Venus boasted of it."

"And M. de Wardes," said Anne of Austria, calmly, "spread the report that Venus was right."

"Ah, De Wardes," thought Madame, "you will pay dearly for that wound inflicted upon the noblest of men!"

And she began to accuse De Wardes with all possible fury, thus paying the wounded man's debt and her own, with the certainty that she was causing her enemy's future ruin. She said so much about it that had Manicamp been there he would have regretted having served his friend so well, since it brought about the ruin of his unfortunate enemy.

"Well," said Anne of Austria, "I see but one difficulty in all this, and that is La Vallière."

The young Queen picked up her work again with marked coldness.

Madame listened.

"Is not that your opinion?" asked Anne of Austria. "Do you not attribute to her the cause of this quarrel and duel?"

Madame replied by a gesture which was neither an affirmation nor a denial.

"I do not understand, then, what you told me in regard to a flirtation," resumed Anne of Austria.

"It is true," Madame hastened to say, "that if the young girl had not been a coquette, Mars would not have been interested in her."

The word "Mars" brought a passing blush to the young Queen's cheeks, but nevertheless she went on with the work she had begun.

"I do not wish men at my court to fight one another in any such way," said Anne of Austria, phlegmatically. "That custom was, perhaps, useful at a time when nobility, divided, had no rallying point save gallantry. Then women — whose rule was absolute — had the privilege of testing the bravery of the gentlemen in various ways; but to-day, thank God, there is but one master in France. To him is due all strength and thought. I will not allow my son to be deprived of a single one of his servants."

She turned to the young Queen. "What is to be done about this La Vallière?" said she.

"La Vallière?" said the Queen in apparent surprise; "I do not know the name."

And this reply was accompanied by one of those icy smiles suited only to royal lips.

Madame herself was a great princess, great in intellect, in birth, and in pride; nevertheless the weight of the answer crushed her, and she was obliged to wait a moment in order to gather herself together.

"She is one of my maids of honor," she said, with a bow.

"In that case," replied Maria Teresa, in the same tone, "it is your affair, sister, not ours."

"Pardon me," said Anne of Austria, "it is my affair. And I understand perfectly," she continued, giving Madame an intelligent look, "why Madame has told me this."

"What emanates from you, Madame," said the English princess, "comes from the lips of Wisdom."

"In sending this girl back to her own country," said Maria Teresa, gently, "she must be given a pension."

"From my money-box!" cried Madame, quickly.

"No, no, Madame," interrupted Anne of Austria, "there must be no fuss about it, if you please. The King does not like to have unpleasant things said about ladies. Let all this, I beg, be settled in our family. Madame, be so kind as to have the girl sent here. You, my daughter, will be good enough to retire a moment to your own room."

The requests of the aged queen were commands. Maria Teresa arose to go to her apartments, and Madame to send a page for La Vallière.

CHAPTER LXX.

THE FIRST QUARREL.

LA VALLIÈRE entered the apartments of the queen mother without the slightest suspicion that a dangerous plot was being hatched about her. She supposed it was a matter relating to her duties, and on that subject the queen mother had never been disagreeable to her. Besides, not feeling the direct authority of Anne of Austria, she had had with her only formal dealing, to which her own complaisance and the rank of the august princess required her to give all possible grace.

She advanced, therefore, to the queen mother with that calm sweet smile which was her chief charm.

As she did not approach near enough, Anne of Austria signed to her to come to her chair. Then Madame returned and in a perfectly calm manner seated herself beside her mother-in-law and took up the work begun by Maria Teresa.

Instead of the command she had expected to receive at once, La Vallière perceived this preamble, and looked curiously and rather anxiously at the faces of both princesses.

Anne was deep in thought. Madame preserved an affectation of indifference which would have alarmed the least timid.

"Mademoiselle," said the queen mother, suddenly, without even thinking of moderating her Spanish accent, a thing she never failed to do unless she was angry, "come a little nearer, that we may talk to you, since every one is talking about you."

"About me?" cried La Vallière, growing pale.

"Pretend not to know it, pretty; have you heard of the duel between M. de Guiche and M. de Wardes?"

"Heavens, Madame! news of it came to me only yesterday," replied La Vallière, clasping her hands.

"And did you not know the news in advance?"

"How should I have known about it, Madame?"

"Because two men never fight without a motive, and because you must have known the reason for the hatred of these two rivals."

"I am absolutely ignorant of it, Madame."

"Persevering denial is rather an ordinary mode of defence, and you who are clever, mademoiselle, ought to avoid the commonplace. Give something else."

"Ah! Madame, your Majesty frightens me with that cold glance. Have I had the misfortune to incur your displeasure?"

Madame began to laugh. La Vallière looked at her in amazement.

Anne resumed:

"My displeasure! Incur my displeasure! You cannot suppose such a thing, Mademoiselle de la Vallière; I have to think of people in order to have them incur my displeasure. I think of you only because people are talking a good deal about you just now, and I do not like the ladies of this Court to be talked about."

"Your Majesty honors me by telling me of this," replied La Vallière, frightened; "but I do not understand why they should be interested in me."

"Well, I will tell you, then, M. de Guiche attempted to defend you."

"Me?"

"Yes. He is a knight, and beautiful adventuresses like to have knights couching lances for them. I detest the battlefield, — and adventures especially. Therefore you must suffer."

La Vallière knelt before the queen, who turned her back on her. She held out her hands to Madame, who laughed in her face.

A feeling of pride awoke in her.

"Mesdames," said she, "I have asked you the nature of my crime. Your Majesty ought to tell me, but I notice that your Majesty condemns me without giving me time to justify myself."

"Ah," cried Anne of Austria, "see what fine phrases! What beautiful sentiments! This girl is the Infanta, one of the aspirants to the great Cyrus; she is a well of tenderness and of heroic sentences. It is easy to see, my pretty, that our mind is improved by contact with crowned heads!"

La Vallière was cut to the quick. She became as white as a lily and all her strength forsook her.

"I want to tell you," resumed the queen, scornfully, "that if you continue to foster such ideas you will so mortify the rest of us women that we shall be ashamed to be seen near you. Be simple, mademoiselle. By the way, what have I been told? You are betrothed, I believe?"

La Vallière restrained the feelings of her heart, torn by a new pain.

"Answer when I speak to you."

"Yes, Madame."

"To a gentleman?"

"Yes, Madame."

"What is his name?"

"M. le Vicomte de Bragelonne."

"Do you know that that is a very good prospect for you, mademoiselle; and that without fortune, without position, without great personal advantages, you ought to thank Heaven for such an outlook?"

La Vallière made no reply.

"Where is this Vicomte de Bragelonne?" continued the queen.

"In England," said Madame, "where the report of mademoiselle's success will not fail to reach him."

"Great Heavens!" murmured La Vallière, distracted.

"Well, mademoiselle," said Anne of Austria, "we will bring back this young man and will send you away somewhere with him. If you are of a different mind — for young girls have strange fancies — trust me, I will bring you back to the right path. I have done that for many girls, not worth as much as you are."

La Vallière no longer heard. The pitiless queen continued:

"I will send you alone somewhere, where you can ponder at your ease. Reflection calms the blood and dissipates the illusions of youth. I suppose that you understand me?"

"Madame! Madame!"

"Not another word."

"Madame, I am innocent of everything your Majesty imagines. See my despair. I love, I respect your Majesty so much."

"Better for you if you did not respect me," said the queen, with cold irony. "Better for you if you were not innocent. Do you imagine that I should quietly leave you if you had committed any mistake?"

"Oh, Madame, you are killing me!"

"No theatricals, if you please, or I shall bring about the denouement. Now go back to your room and profit by what I have said to you."

"Madame," said La Vallière to the Duchess d'Orléans, seizing her hands, "intercede for me, you who are so good."

"I?" replied the latter, with an insulting laugh. "I good? Ah, mademoiselle, you do not believe a word of that."

And she roughly thrust aside the young girl's hand.

The latter, instead of giving way, as both princesses might have expected from her pallor and her tears, suddenly resumed her calm and dignified manner, made a low courtesy, and withdrew.

"Well," said Anne of Austria to Madame, "do you think she will cause any more trouble?"

"I distrust people who are sweet and gentle," replied Madame. "Nothing is more determined than a patient heart; nothing is surer of itself than a gentle spirit."

"I promise you that she will think twice before looking at Mars."

"Unless she makes use of his shield," said Madame.

The queen mother answered this remark by a proud look which was not without cunning, and both ladies, well-nigh sure of their victory, set out to find Maria Teresa, who was waiting for them, and trying to hide her impatience.

It was then half-past six in the evening and the King had just had supper. He lost no time. The meal over and business finished he took Saint-Aignan by the arm and said he wished to be taken to La Vallière's apartments.

The courtier made a loud exclamation.

"Well, what is the matter?" said the King, "I am merely taking up an old habit, and in order to do so I must begin sometime."

"But, Sire, the apartment of the maids of honor is as bright as a lantern; every one sees those who enter it and those who leave. You should have some pretext — this one, for instance —"

"Well?"

"If your Majesty would wait until Madame returned to her rooms."

"More pretexts! more delay! Enough of these disappointments and mysteries! I do not see how the King of France can hurt himself by talking to a girl of intelligence. Evil be to him who evil thinks!"

"Sire, Sire, your Majesty will forgive my excess of zeal."

"Speak."

"What about the Queen?"

"That is true! that is true! I wish the Queen always to be respected. Well, this evening I will go to Mademoiselle de la Vallière's, and after this day I will make all the pretexts that you wish. To-morrow we will find some; this evening I have no time."

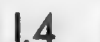
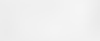
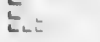
Saint-Aignan did not reply. He descended the stairs in front of the King and crossed the court-yard with a feeling of shame which did not completely efface the signal honor of supporting the King.

Saint-Aignan wished to keep himself uncompromised in the eyes of Madame and the two queens. But he did not wish to displease Mademoiselle de la Vallière, and in order to do so much it was difficult to avoid encountering some obstacle.



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Now the windows of the young Queen's room, those of the queen mother's, and those of Madame's looked out upon the court-yard of the maids of honor. To be seen conducting the King was to break with three important princesses, with three women of permanent favor, for the small pleasure of a passing favor of the mistress.

His poor Saint-Aignan, who had been so brave in protecting La Vallière beneath the oaks or in the park at Fontainebleau, was no longer brave in the light of day. He found a thousand faults in this girl, and longed to tell the King of them. But his ordeal was soon over: the court-yards were traversed; not a curtain had been raised, not a window opened. The King walked quickly, in the first place because of his impatience, then because of the long legs of Saint-Aignan, who preceded him. At the door Saint-Aignan wished to disappear, but the King detained him.

This was a delicacy with which the courtier could have dispensed. He had to follow Louis to La Vallière's room.

On the arrival of the monarch the young girl dried her eyes, but did this so hurriedly that the King noticed it. He questioned her like an interested lover, and urged her to tell him what troubled her.

"Nothing at all, Sire," said she.

"But you were crying."

"Oh, no, Sire."

"Look, Saint-Aignan. Am I wrong?"

Saint-Aignan had to answer, but he was greatly embarrassed.

"Well, your eyes are red, mademoiselle," said the King.

"The dust on the road, Sire."

"No, you have lost that happy look which made you so beautiful and attractive. You do not look at me."

"Sire!"

"Yes, you avoid my eyes."

In fact, she had turned away.

"Why, in Heaven's name, what is the matter?" asked Louis, whose blood began to boil.

"Nothing, Sire, and I am ready to show your Majesty that my mind is as free from trouble as you could wish."

"Your mind free, when I see you embarrassed in every way, even in your gestures? Has any one hurt you or made you angry?"

"No, no, Sire!"

"Oh! I insist upon your telling me!" said the young prince, with flashing eyes.

"But no one, Sire, no one has offended me."

"Well, then, resume that dreamy gayety or joyous melancholy I loved in you this morning. Come, I beg you."

"Yes, Sire, yes."

The King stamped his foot.

"Such a change is inexplicable," said he, and he looked at Saint-Aignan, who for his part had noticed La Vallière's sad languor as well as the King's impatience.

Louis begged in vain; in vain he strove to combat that fatal disposition. The young girl was broken; even the sight of death would not have roused her from torpor.

The King saw in this impassiveness an unwelcome mystery. He began to look about him suspiciously. In the room was a miniature of Athos. The King saw this portrait, which greatly resembled Bragelonne, for it had been painted when the count was young.

He looked threateningly at it. In her depressed state and, moreover, thinking of anything but the picture, La Vallière could not divine the King's preoccupation.

The latter was occupied with a terrible thought which had assailed him more than once, but which he had always thrust aside. He recalled the intimacy of the young people since their childhood. He remembered the betrothal which had followed. He remembered that Athos had come to ask him for the hand of La Vallière for Raoul. He fancied that on her return to Paris La Vallière had received news from London which had counterbalanced the influence which he himself had exercised over her. Immediately he felt himself stung by the gadfly called jealousy.

He again questioned the girl, this time with bitterness, but she could not answer. She would have had to tell him everything. She would have had to accuse the Queen and Madame. That would have meant undertaking an open struggle with two great and powerful princesses. It seemed to her in the first place that, since she was doing nothing to hide her thoughts from the King, he ought to have read her heart in spite of her silence; that if he really loved her he ought to have guessed, to have divined everything.

What was sympathy if not the divine flame which ought to

enlighten the heart and to make it possible for true lovers to dispense with speech? She was silent, therefore, contenting herself with sighs and tears, while she hid her face in her hands.

These sighs and tears, which at first had touched Louis XIV., frightened him and finally irritated him. He could not bear to be opposed — not even by sighs and tears. His words became sharp, vehement, aggressive.

This was an additional grief to the young girl. She gained from what she regarded as an injustice on the part of her lover the strength to resist not only others, but even him. The King began to accuse her directly. La Vallière did not even attempt to defend herself. She bore every accusation without making other reply than to shake her head, without uttering a word save the two which come from deeply troubled hearts:

“My God! my God!”

But instead of calming the King's anger, this cry of pain increased it; it was a call to a power superior to his, to One who could defend La Vallière against himself.

Besides, he saw that he was seconded by Saint-Aignan. The latter, as we have said, saw the storm brewing; he did not know how deeply Louis XIV. could love. He felt all the blows of the three princesses falling on him, the ruin of poor La Vallière, and he was not man enough not to fear being dragged into the ruin.

Saint-Aignan answered the interpellations of the King by words uttered in a low tone or by indifferent gestures, which were meant to embitter things and bring about a quarrel, the result of which might free him from the trouble that might arise from crossing the court-yard in daylight in order to follow his illustrious companion to La Vallière's apartment.

Meanwhile the King was growing more and more excited. He started to leave the room, and then came back. The young girl had not raised her head, although the sound of his steps must have told her that her lover was leaving. He paused a moment before her with folded arms.

“For the last time, mademoiselle,” said he, “will you speak? Will you give a reason for this change, this whim, this caprice?”

“What do you wish me to say?” murmured La Vallière. “You see very well, Sire, that I am completely overcome!”

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"FOR THE LAST TIME, MADEMOISELLE, WILL YOU SPEAK?"

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You see that I have neither will-power, nor thought, nor word."

"Is it so difficult to tell the truth? You could have told it in fewer words than you have used."

"But the truth about what?"

"Everything."

The truth, in fact, was rising to La Vallière's lips. Her arms were about to open, but still she sat silent, and her arms fell down. The poor girl had not yet been wretched enough to risk such a revelation.

"I know nothing," she stammered.

"Oh, it is more than coquetry!" cried the King. "It is more than caprice, it is treason!"

And this time nothing stopped him; not even the beating of his heart could make him turn back, and with a despairing gesture he rushed from the room.

Saint-Aignan followed, asking nothing better than to leave.

Louis XIV. did not pause until he had reached the stairway. Then leaning against the banister he said:

"You see I have been shamefully deceived!"

"How so, Sire?" asked the favorite.

"De Guiche fought in behalf of the Vicomte de Bragelonne. And this Bragelonne —"

"Well?"

"Well, she still loves him. And really, Saint-Aignan, I should die of shame if in three days there were to remain in my heart a single atom of love for this girl."

And Louis XIV. returned to his apartments.

"Ah, I told your Majesty!" murmured Saint-Aignan, still following the King and timidly watching every window.

Unfortunately it did not happen this time as it had happened before. A curtain was raised. Behind it stood Madame. She had seen the King leave the apartment of the maids of honor.

When Louis had passed, she hurriedly left her room, and, descending the stairs two steps at a time, went directly to the apartments he had just visited.

CHAPTER LXXI.

DESPAIR.

AFTER the King had gone, La Vallière rose with arms outstretched as if to stop him, but when the door had closed behind him and the sound of his footsteps had died away in the distance she had had only strength enough to fall at the feet of her crucifix. There she lay, crushed, broken down, swallowed up in her despair, taking account of nothing except grief — a grief which she realized only by instinct and sensation.

In the midst of this tumult of thought La Vallière heard the door open. She gave a start and turned around, thinking that the King had come back; but she was mistaken, it was only Madame. What was Madame to her? She fell back, her head on the prie-dieu. It was Madame, excited, irritated, threatening. But what was that to her?

"Mademoiselle," said the princess, pausing before La Vallière; "it is very beautiful, I admit, to fall on your knees, to pray, to act in a pious manner; but humble as you may seem to the King of Heaven, you ought to have a little regard for the will of the lords of earth."

La Vallière with difficulty raised her head as a mark of respect.

"A short time ago," continued Madame, "a suggestion was made to you, I think?"

La Vallière's wild and glassy eye showed her utter forgetfulness of what had taken place that morning.

"The queen suggested to you," continued Madame, "to conduct yourself in such a way as to prevent all further circulation of rumors concerning you."

La Vallière's glance became a questioning one.

"Well," said Madame, "some one has just left you whose presence is an accusation."

La Vallière was silent.

Madame went on:

"I cannot have my house, that of the first princess of the blood, setting such a bad example; you will be the cause. I tell you, mademoiselle, with no witness, — for I do not seek to humiliate you, — that you are free to go away at once and return to your mother at Blois."

La Vallière could fall no lower. La Vallière could suffer no more than she had already suffered. Her face did not change; her hands remained clasped on her knees like those of the divine Magdalen.

"Do you hear me?" said Madame.

A shiver, which passed from her head to her feet, was La Vallière's only answer.

And as the victim gave no other sign of life, Madame left the room.

It seemed to La Vallière that her heart had stopped beating, that her blood had frozen in her veins; but suddenly she felt a throbbing sensation in her fingers, in her throat, in her temples. This throbbing increased until it soon changed into high fever and delirium, in which she saw the faces of her friends who were struggling against her enemies.

In her dull ears she heard commingled threats and words of love: she no longer seemed herself, she was taken out of herself as if on the wings of some strong wind; and along the horizon of the road towards which her fever was driving her she saw the door of the tomb open showing her the formidable and sombre interior of everlasting night.

But she finally became calm as the dreams that had beset her gave place to her usual resignation. A ray of hope entered her heart as a sunbeam enters the cell of a prisoner.

She saw herself again upon the road from Fontainebleau; she saw the King riding beside her coach telling her he loved her, asking for her love in return — making her swear that in case of any misunderstanding the evening should not pass without a visit, a letter, a sign, to atone for the trouble of the day and ensure a peaceful night. It was the King who had thought of that, who had made her swear to that. It was, therefore, impossible that the King should forget this promise which he himself had demanded, unless he were a despot who exacted love as he exacted obedience, unless he were so indifferent that the first obstacle in the way blocked his path.

So the King, that gentle protector who by a word, a single word, could bring to an end all her troubles, had joined the number of her persecutors. Oh, his anger could not last. Now that he was alone, his sufferings must equal hers. But he was not chained down as she was; he could act, move,

come; while she could do nothing but wait. And she did wait, with all her soul, poor child; for it was impossible that the King would not come.

It was about half-past ten. He would certainly come, or write to her, or send some word by M. de Saint-Aignan.

If he came, oh, she would rush to meet him! How she would cast aside that delicacy which now she knew had been so greatly misunderstood! She would say to him:

"It is not I who do not love you; it is they who do not want me to love you."

And thus it must be admitted that the more she thought of it the more she felt that Louis was not to be blamed. In fact, he was ignorant of the whole thing. What must he have thought of her obstinacy in keeping quiet! Impatient, irritable as he was known to be, it was extraordinary that he had controlled himself for so long. She should not have acted in such a way, she should have understood everything, divined everything; but she was a poor girl and not a great King.

"Oh, but he would come! He would come! She would forgive him for all he had made her suffer. She would love him more for having made her suffer."

And leaning in the direction of the door, with parted lips she waited — God forgive this profanity — for a repetition of the kiss which the King had given her that morning when he uttered the word "love."

If the King did not come at least he would write. This was the second prospect, less sweet, less tempting than the other, but one which would show as much love, though of a more timid nature. Oh, how she would devour the letter! with what haste she would answer it! when the messenger had gone how she would kiss it, re-read it, and press to her heart the dear paper which had brought her rest, peace, and joy.

The King was not coming. Well, if the King did not write it was impossible that he should not send Saint-Aignan, or that Saint-Aignan should not come of his own accord. How she would tell everything to a third party! His Majesty would not be there to freeze the words on her lips, and then no further doubt could remain in the King's heart.

Every part of La Vallière, heart and eye, body and soul, was concentrated on this expectation.

She told herself she still had an hour; that until midnight the King might come, write, or send; that not until mid-

night need she give up all hope. At the slightest sound in the palace the poor girl thought she knew the cause. Whenever men passed through the court-yard she thought they were messengers from the King.

Eleven o'clock struck, then a quarter past, then half past. The minutes crept slowly by in her anxiety, and yet they went all too quickly.

Three-quarters struck.

Midnight! midnight! the final, the supreme hope had come. With the last stroke of the clock the last flicker of light died away; with the last light, the last hope.

So the King had deceived her; he was the first to break the oath he had made that very day. Twelve hours between the oath and perjury! That was not long to have kept up the illusion.

So not only did the King not love her, but he despised her when every one was crushing her; he despised her to the extent of abandoning her to the shame of an exile, which was equivalent to an ignominious sentence. And yet it was he, he the King, who was the primary cause of that ignominy.

A bitter smile, the only sign of anger which during her long struggle had passed over the victim's angelic face, appeared on her lips. What was there left for her in the world since she had lost the King? Nothing. But God remained in heaven. She thought of God.

"My God," said she, "tell me what to do. It is from Thee that I look for everything, to Thee that I owe everything."

And she looked at her crucifix, the feet of which she kissed lovingly.

"He," said she, "is a Master who never forgets and abandons those who do not forget or abandon Him. To Him alone will I give myself."

Then if any one could have looked in upon that room he would have seen the poor girl making a final resolution, forming in her mind a final plan; in short, climbing up that long ladder of Jacob, by which souls ascend from earth to heaven.

When her knees could no longer support her, she sank upon the steps of the prie-dieu, her head leaning against the wooden cross, her eyes fixed, her breathing quick, watching the first light of day breaking through the window.

Two o'clock in the morning found her in this frenzy, or rather in this ecstasy. She no longer belonged to herself. So when she saw the violet tint of morning touch the roofs of the palace, outlining vaguely the ivory figure of the Christ which she held in her hands, she rose with a certain strength, kissed the feet of the divine martyr, left her room, and, wrapping herself in a cloak, descended the stairs.

She reached the gate just as the musketeers opened the door to admit the first division of the Swiss guard. Then slipping behind the men, she gained the street before the chief of the patrol even had time to wonder who the young woman was who was leaving the palace at so early an hour.

CHAPTER LXXII.

THE FLIGHT.

LEAVING behind her the patrol, which went to the right by the Rue Saint-Honoré, La Vallière turned mechanically to the left. Her resolution was taken, her plan formed. She would go to the Carmelites at Chaillot, the mother superior of whom had a reputation for severity which made the worldly people at court tremble.

La Vallière had never seen Paris, had never gone out on foot, and could not have found her way even in a calmer frame of mind. This explains why she turned up the Rue Saint-Honoré instead of going in the opposite direction.

She was in haste to leave the Palais-Royal. She had heard that Chaillot faced the Seine, and she set out, therefore, in that direction. She took the Rue du Coq, and unable to go through the Louvre, started towards the Church of Saint-Germain l'Auxerrois, passing by the place where Perrault afterwards built his colonnade. She soon reached the quays. She walked in a hurried and excited manner, and scarcely felt that infirmity which from time to time reminded her, by forcing her to limp, of the sprain she had received in her childhood.

At any other hour of the day her face would have aroused the suspicion of the least observing, and would have attracted the attention of the least curious passers-by.

But at half-past two o'clock in the morning the streets of Paris are practically deserted. Only the laborers who work for their daily bread are out, or dangerous loafers returning home after a night of revelry and debauchery. For the former the day was beginning; for the latter it was ending.

La Vallière was afraid of all those faces among which, because of her ignorance of Parisian types, she was unable to distinguish those of honesty from those of cynicism. For her, misery was a scarecrow; and every one she met seemed miserable.

Her dress, which she had worn since the previous evening, even in its neglected state was elegant, for it was the same she had worn to the queen mother's. Moreover, beneath the hood which she had raised in order the better to see, her pallor and her beautiful eyes spoke a language unknown to those men of the people, and all unconsciously the poor runaway elicited the brutality of some, the pity of others.

So, breathless and excited, La Vallière walked on as far as the Place de Grève. Every now and then she stopped, pressed her hand to her heart, leaned against some house, caught her breath, and went on more rapidly than before. Having reached the Place de Grève, La Vallière came face to face with a group of three drunken men, who, with shirts open at the throat, were staggering out of a boat which was moored to the dock.

The boat was laden with wines, and it was easy to see they had done honor to their wares. They were singing their bacchanalian exploits in three different keys, when, on reaching the end of the steps which descended to the quay, they suddenly found they were barring the way of a young girl.

La Vallière stopped.

At sight of this woman in court dress they halted, and with one accord joined hands and surrounded La Vallière, singing:

"You are having such a stupid time alone.
Come and laugh with us."

La Vallière then understood that the men were speaking to her and that they wished to prevent her passing. She made several attempts to escape, but in vain. Her limbs gave way; she felt she was going to fall and she uttered a cry of terror.

But at that moment the circle about her was suddenly forced open. One of the wretches was hurled aside, another rolled to the edge of the water, the third tottered under the shock. An officer of the musketeers with frowning brow, threatening words on his lips, and hands still raised, turned and faced the young girl. At sight of the uniform and especially before the evidence of strength which its wearer had just given, the drunken men fled.

"*Mordieux!*" cried the officer. "It is Mademoiselle de la Vallière!"

La Vallière, dazed by what had just taken place, on hearing her name uttered, raised her eyes and recognized D'Artagnan.

"Yes, monsieur," said she, "it is I." And she clung to his arm.

"You will protect me, M. d'Artagnan, will you not?" she said, pleadingly.

"Certainly I will protect you, but, in Heaven's name, where can you be going at this hour?"

"I am going to Chaillot."

"Going to Chaillot by way of La Rapée? Why, mademoiselle, you are going in exactly the opposite direction!"

"In that case, monsieur, be good enough to put me on the right road and to lend me your escort for a short distance."

"Willingly."

"But how does it happen that I find you here? By what act of Providence were you enabled to come to my assistance? I feel as if I were dreaming. I think I must be mad."

"I am here, mademoiselle, because I have a house on the Place de Grève at the '*Image de Notre Dame*.' I had to look after the rent yesterday and spent the night there. Besides, I wanted to be at the palace early for inspection."

"Thank you," said La Vallière.

"That's what I was doing," said D'Artagnan to himself, "but what has she been doing, and why is she going to Chaillot at such an hour?"

He offered her his arm and she began to walk rapidly. But her haste hid great weakness. D'Artagnan realized this and suggested that she should rest, but La Vallière refused.

"Perhaps you do not know where Chaillot is?" said D'Artagnan.

"No, I do not."

"It is a long distance from here."

"That does not matter."

"It is a mile at least."

"I can walk it."

D'Artagnan did not reply. He knew from the simple tone that her mind was made up. He carried rather than accompanied La Vallière. At last they saw the heights.

"To what house are you going, mademoiselle?" asked D'Artagnan.

"To the Carmelites, monsieur."

"The Carmelites!" said D'Artagnan, astonished.

"Yes, and since God sent you to help me on my journey accept my thanks and my adieux."

"The Carmelites! Your adieux! You are going to enter a convent, then?" said D'Artagnan.

"Yes, monsieur."

"You!!!"

In this *you*, after which we have placed three exclamation points to render it as expressive as possible, there was an entire poem. He recalled to La Vallière her old memories of Blois and her new souvenirs of Fontainebleau. He said to her, "*You* who could be happy with Raoul, *you* who could be influential with Louis, *you* going to enter a convent!"

"Yes, monsieur," said she. "I have given myself to the Lord, I have renounced the world."

"But are you not mistaking your vocation? Are you not misinterpreting God's will?"

"No, since God has allowed me to meet you. If it had not been for you I should certainly have succumbed to fatigue; and since God sent you to me it is because he wishes me to attain my object."

"Oh," said D'Artagnan, dubiously, "that seems to me very subtle."

"However that may be," went on the young girl, "you now know my resolution — I have a last favor to ask of you."

"What is it, mademoiselle?"

"The King does not know of my flight from the Palais-Royal."

D'Artagnan gave a start.

"The King," continued La Vallière, "does not know what I am going to do."

"The King does not know it?" cried D'Artagnan. "Take care, mademoiselle! you do not realize the full meaning of

what you are about to do. No one, especially of those at court, should do anything of which the King is ignorant."

"I am no longer at court, monsieur."

D'Artagnan looked at the young girl with increasing astonishment.

"Oh, you need not worry, monsieur," she continued, "everything is arranged, and even were it not, it is too late now to retract. The deed is done."

"Well, mademoiselle, what do you want?"

"Monsieur, from the pity one bestows on misfortune, by the generosity in your soul, on your honor as a gentleman, I beseech you to make me an oath."

"An oath?"

"Yes."

"What is it?"

"Swear to me, M. d'Artagnan, that you will not tell the King you have seen me, or that I am with the Carmelites."

D'Artagnan shook his head.

"I will not swear that," said he.

"Why not?"

"Because I know the King, because I know you, because I know myself, and because I know human nature. No, I will not swear that."

"Then," cried La Vallière, with an energy of which one would not have believed her capable, "instead of the blessings I would have bestowed on you to the end of my days, I curse you, for you have made me the most miserable of creatures!"

We have said that D'Artagnan understood every accent that came from the heart; he could not resist this one. He saw the worn-out face, he saw the trembling limbs, he saw the frail, delicate body quivering from some shock, and he realized that resistance would kill her.

"It shall be as you wish," said he. "Rest assured, mademoiselle, I will say nothing to the King."

"Oh, thank you, thank you!" cried La Vallière, "you are the most generous of men."

And in a transport of joy she seized D'Artagnan's hands and clasped them between her own.

The latter felt himself growing tender.

"*Mordieu!*" said he, "here is one beginning where others end. It is touching."

Then La Vallière, who in a moment of despair had sunk upon a stone, rose and walked to the convent of the Carmelites, which was seen rising in the dawning light.

D'Artagnan followed her from afar.

The parlor door was open. She glided in like a pale shadow, and thanking D'Artagnan with a wave of her hand, she disappeared from sight.

When D'Artagnan found himself alone he pondered deeply on what had just taken place.

"Well," said he, "I am in what might be called a false position. To keep such a secret is to keep in one's pocket a glowing coal, trusting that it will not burn one's clothes. Not to keep a secret when one has sworn to do so is the act of a man devoid of honor. Usually good ideas come to me quickly, but now, either I am greatly mistaken or I shall have to run a long time before finding a solution to this problem. Where shall I run? Faith! in the first place, in the direction of Paris — good direction! On'y to run quickly, four legs are better than two. Unfortunately, just at present I have but two. 'A horse!' as I have heard them say in the London theatre, 'my kingdom for a horse!'"

"Now that I think of it an animal would not cost as much as that. There are some musketeers at the barrier of the Conférence, and for one horse that I need I could get ten."

As a result of this determination, made with his usual rapidity of action, D'Artagnan at once ascended the heights, reached the musketeers, seized the best horse he could find, and was at the palace in ten minutes.

Five o'clock was striking from the Palais-Royal.

D'Artagnan asked for the King.

Louis had retired at his usual hour after having worked with M. Colbert, and in all probability was still asleep.

"Well," said he, "she spoke the truth. The King knows nothing about it. If he knew only the half of what had happened the Palais-Royal would be upside down."

CHAPTER LXXIII.

HOW LOUIS SPENT THE TIME BETWEEN HALF-PAST TEN AND MIDNIGHT.

ON leaving the apartment of the maids of honor, Louis found in his rooms Colbert, who was awaiting orders concerning the ceremony for the following day. There was to be, as we have said, a reception for the Dutch and Spanish ambassadors.

Louis XIV. had grave cause for displeasure towards Holland. Several times already the States had practised evasion in their relations with France, and without noticing or fearing any prospect of a rupture, they again gave up their alliance with the very Christian King, to concoct all sorts of intrigues with Spain.

At his accession, that is, at the death of Mazarin, Louis XIV. had found this political question before him. It was difficult for a young man to solve; but as at that time the whole nation was represented in the king, everything the head decided on, the body was ready to carry out. A little anger, the reaction of quick young blood to the brain, was enough to change an ancient political line and create another system.

The business of the diplomats at that time consisted merely in arranging the state policies which their sovereigns might need. Louis was not in a mood to have any wise policy dictated to him. Still affected by the quarrel which he had just had with La Vallière, he wandered about his cabinet anxious to find an opportunity to give vent to his feelings after having contained himself for so long.

On seeing the King, Colbert grasped the situation at once, and understood the monarch's intentions. He manœuvred. When the master asked what had to be done the next day, the intendant began by finding it strange that his Majesty had not been informed by M. Fouquet.

"M. Fouquet," said he, "knows all about this affair with Holland; he receives all correspondence direct."

Accustomed to hear M. Colbert attack M. Fouquet, the King let this sally pass without comment. He merely listened.

Colbert saw the effect of his words, and hastened to retract, saying that M. Fouquet was not, however, as culpable as he

appeared at first sight, since just at that time he was greatly preoccupied. The King looked up.

"How preoccupied?" said he.

"Sire, men are only men, and M. Fouquet has his faults as well as his good qualities."

"Ah, who is without faults, M. Colbert?"

"Your Majesty certainly has many," said Colbert, boldly, who knew how to offer deep flattery under light censure, as an arrow, in spite of its weight, cleaves the air, thanks to the light feathers which uphold it.

The King smiled.

"What is M. Fouquet's fault?" said he.

"Always the same one, Sire; they say he is in love."

"In love with whom?"

"I do not know, Sire; I have little to do with those 'affairs,' as they are called."

"But you must know, since you mention it."

"I have heard it said —"

"What?"

"A name."

"Whose?"

"I cannot remember."

"Tell me."

"I think it is that of one of Madame's maids of honor."

The King started.

"You know more about it than you want to tell me, M. Colbert," he murmured.

"Oh, Sire, I assure you I do not."

"Well, come, Madame's maids of honor are known, and if you heard the names perhaps you would recognize the one you are trying to remember."

"No, Sire."

"Try."

"It would be useless, Sire. When it is a question of compromised ladies, my memory is a brass chest, the key of which I have lost."

A cloud passed over the mind and the brow of the King. Then wishing to seem master of himself, he shook his head and said:

"Now about the affair with Holland?"

"In the first place, Sire, when does your Majesty wish to receive the ambassadors?"

"Early."

"Eleven o'clock?"

"That is too late. Nine."

"That is very early."

"For friends it does not matter. One does as one likes with friends, but with enemies—if they are wounded, so much the better. I shall not be sorry, I confess, to get through with all these swamp birds who weary me with their cries."

"Sire, it shall be as your Majesty wishes. At nine o'clock, then. I will give orders to that effect. Is the audience to be formal?"

"No, I want to explain matters to them and not to irritate them, as always happens when many people are present; but at the same time I want them to understand the situation so that we shall not have to begin all over again."

"Your Majesty will designate those who are to be present at this reception."

"I will make out the list. Now about these ambassadors. What do they want?"

"Allied with Spain, they will gain nothing; allied with France, they will lose much."

"How so?"

"Allied with Spain, they will be limited and protected by the possessions of their ally; they cannot bite in spite of their desire to do so. From Antwerp to Rotterdam is but a step by the Scheldt and the Meuse. If they wish to bite a piece of the Spanish cake, you, Sire, the son-in-law of the King of Spain, can in two days go from here to Brussels with the cavalry. It is a question, therefore, of breaking with you and of making you suspect Spain sufficiently to keep from taking part in her affairs."

"In that case it is very simple," replied the King, "to make a solid alliance with me by which I should gain something, while they would gain everything."

"No; for if they should chance to have you for a neighbor, your Majesty would be no easy one. Young, ardent, warlike, the King of France can give Holland some rough blows, especially if he approaches her."

"I understand perfectly, M. Colbert, and it is well explained. But the conclusion, if you please?"

"Your Majesty's decisions are never without wisdom."

"What will these ambassadors say to me?"

"They will tell your Majesty that they greatly desire this alliance, and that will be a falsehood; they will tell the Spaniards that the three powers ought to combine against the prosperity of England, and that will be a falsehood; for your Majesty's natural ally to-day is England, who has vessels when you have none; England who can balance the power of Holland in India; England, in short, a monarchy, where your Majesty has alliances and blood relations."

"Very good, but what would you reply?"

"I should reply, Sire, with unsurpassed moderation, that Holland is not wholly suited to the King of France; that public feeling in Holland is alarming for your Majesty; that certain medals have been struck off with devices which are injurious."

"To me?" cried the young King, excited.

"Oh, no, Sire; injurious is not the word; I am mistaken. I meant very flattering for the Batavians."

"Oh, if such is the case the pride of the Batavians matters little," said the King, sighing.

"Your Majesty is a thousand times right. However, since your Majesty knows better than I, it is never poor policy to be unjust in order to obtain a concession. Your Majesty complaining with irritation of the Batavians will seem to them to be much more important."

"What are these medals?" demanded Louis; "for if I am to speak of them I must know what to say."

"Faith, Sire, I scarcely know what they are — some presumptuous device, that is all; the words are unimportant."

"Very well, I will use the word 'medal,' and they will understand if they so desire."

"Oh, they will understand. Your Majesty can also let fall a few words about the circulation of certain pamphlets."

"Never! The pamphlets hurt those who write them much more than those against whom they are written. M. Colbert, I thank you; you may retire."

"Sire!"

"Adieu! Do not forget to be on time."

"Sire, I await your Majesty's list."

"That is true."

The King began to reflect; he was not thinking of the list

at all. The clock struck half-past eleven. The prince's face showed his terrible struggle between pride and love. The political conversation had effaced much of Louis' vexation, and the pale, haggard face of La Vallière spoke to his imagination a very different language from that of the Dutch medals or the Batavian pamphlets.

For ten minutes he pondered as to whether he should or should not go back to La Vallière; but Colbert having insisted respectfully on having the list, the King blushed at the thought of his misfortune having been on love when business demanded his time and attention.

He therefore dictated :

"The queen mother, the Queen, Madame, Madame de Motteville, Mademoiselle de Châtillon, Madame de Navailles; and among the men, Monsieur, M. le Prince, M. de Grammont, M. de Manicamp, M. de Saint-Aignan, and the officers on duty."

"The ministers?" said Colbert.

"Certainly, and the secretaries."

"Sire, I shall make everything ready; the orders will be here to-morrow."

"Say to-day," replied Louis, sadly.

Midnight had struck — the hour when poor La Vallière well-nigh died of grief and despair.

The King's attendants entered the room to prepare his bed. The Queen had been waiting for an hour.

Louis went into her room with a sigh, but even in doing so he congratulated himself on his courage. He rejoiced at being as strong in love as he was in politics.

CHAPTER LXXIV.

THE AMBASSADORS.

D'ARTAGNAN had learned almost all we have just related; for he counted among his friends those connected with the house, — official servants, who were proud of being saluted by the captain of the musketeers, for he was a man of influence, and who, apart from ambition, were proud of being considered something by a man as brave as D'Artagnan.

Thus every morning D'Artagnan learned what he had not

been able to see or find out for himself the evening before, not being ubiquitous. So in this way he made up a budget of news every day which he untied at need to take from it the weapon he thought necessary.

Thus D'Artagnan's two eyes did him the same service as the hundred eyes of Argus.

Political secrets, secrets of the bedroom, words dropped by the courtiers on leaving the antechamber, D'Artagnan knew everything and hid everything in the fast and impenetrable tomb of his mind, with the royal secrets so dearly bought and so faithfully guarded.

He knew, therefore, of the interview with Colbert; he knew of the reception to the ambassadors arranged for that morning; he knew there would be a discussion of the medals, and as he set to work to build up a conversation from the few words he had heard, he took his place in the apartments, in order to be on hand when the King awoke. This happened at an early hour, which proved that the King too had had a bad night. Towards seven o'clock Louis gently opened his door.

D'Artagnan was in his place. His Majesty was pale, and evidently fatigued; moreover, he had not finished dressing.

"Call M. de Saint-Aignan," said he.

Saint-Aignan was probably expecting to be summoned, for when the messenger went to him he was already dressed. He hastened to obey the King's command.

A moment later Louis and Saint-Aignan passed through the room; the King walked first. D'Artagnan was at the window which overlooked the court-yard; he did not need to trouble to follow the King with his eyes. One would have said that he had divined in advance where the King was going. Louis went directly to the apartment of the maids of honor. This did not surprise D'Artagnan. He did not doubt, although La Vallière had said nothing about it, that his Majesty had some wrongs to repair.

Saint-Aignan followed the King as on the previous evening, but he was somewhat less nervous and anxious, for he trusted at seven o'clock in the morning that he and the King would be the only ones awake among the august inmates of the château. D'Artagnan stood at the window, calm and indifferent. One would have sworn that he saw nothing and that he was utterly ignorant of the identity of the two adventurers who were crossing the court-yard hidden in their cloaks. Yet

although he appeared not to see them, D'Artagnan did not lose sight of them, and while he stood whistling the old musketeer's march which he remembered only on special occasions, he divined and calculated in advance the outburst of weeping and anger which would break out on Louis' return.

The King entered La Vallière's room, but finding it empty, and the bed not touched, he began to be uneasy, and called Montalais. The latter came quickly, and her astonishment was equal to the King's. All she could tell his Majesty was that she thought she had heard La Vallière weeping a part of the night; but knowing that his Majesty had returned, she had not dared to find out.

"But," asked the King, "where do you think she has gone?"

"Sire," replied Montalais, "Louise is very sentimental. I have often known her to rise at dawn and go into the garden; perhaps she is there this morning."

This seemed very likely to the King, who immediately descended in search of the runaway.

D'Artagnan saw that he was pale, and that he was talking volubly to his companion.

Louis set out in the direction of the gardens.

Saint-Aignan followed, out of breath.

D'Artagnan did not leave his window, though he still whistled, and appeared to note nothing, while as a matter of fact, he saw everything.

"Well, well," he murmured, when the King had disappeared, "his Majesty's passion is stronger than I had supposed. Apparently things are happening which did not exist in Mademoiselle de Mancini's reign."

A quarter of an hour later the King again came in sight. He had searched everywhere and was out of breath, but of course had found no trace of La Vallière. Saint-Aignan followed him, fanning himself with his hat, and in a weary tone asking information of every one he met.

Manicamp was just returning from Fontainebleau. He had made the trip in short stages; where others had taken six hours for it, he had needed twenty-four.

"Have you seen Mademoiselle de la Vallière?" asked Saint-Aignan.

To which Manicamp, always dreamy and abstracted, thinking Saint-Aignan had asked about De Guiche, replied:

"Thank you, the count is somewhat better."

And he kept on to the antechamber. There he found D'Artagnan, whom he questioned as to the frightened look on the King's face. D'Artagnan replied that he was mistaken; that Louis, on the contrary, was very light-hearted.

Eight o'clock struck. The King usually took his breakfast at that hour. It was decreed by etiquette that his Majesty should always be hungry at that time. The meal was served at a small table in his sleeping-room, and was soon over.

Saint-Aignan, from whom he did not wish to be separated, held the napkin for him. Then he attended to some military audiences. Meanwhile he sent Saint-Aignan to make further search; and busy, anxious, still watching for the return of the latter, who had sent his attendants to scour the country, and who had gone there himself, Louis waited until nine o'clock.

As the clock struck he went into his cabinet. The ambassadors arrived at the first stroke of the clock. At the last stroke the queens and Madame appeared. There were three ambassadors from Holland and two from Spain. The King glanced around and saluted them.

At that moment Saint-Aignan entered the room. To Louis his was a much more important arrival than had been that of the ambassadors, notwithstanding their number and the countries from which they had come. So before anything else Louis looked inquiringly at Saint-Aignan who decisively shook his head in sign of "no."

The King's strength well-nigh forsook him, but as the eyes of all were on him he made a great effort and asked the ambassadors to speak. Thereupon one of the Spanish deputies made a long address, in which he set forth the advantages of an alliance with Spain.

The King interrupted him.

"Monsieur, I trust that what is good for France is good for Spain as well."

These words, and especially the tone in which they were uttered, made the ambassador turn pale and the queens blush, for they were both Spanish; their pride of birth and nationality was wounded.

The ambassador from Holland arose to speak complaining of the prejudices which the King showed for the government of his country.

The King interrupted him also.

"Monsieur," said he, "it is strange that you have come here to complain, when I am the one who have reason to complain, and yet, as you see, I have not done so."

"You complain, Sire?" said the ambassador. "And of what?"

The King smiled bitterly.

"Would you blame me, monsieur," said he, "for having prejudices against a government which authorizes and protects public insulters?"

"Sire!"

"I tell you," said the King, growing angry at thought of his own trouble more than because of the political question; "I tell you that Holland is a refuge for all who hate me, and especially for all who injure me."

"Oh, Sire!"

"Ah, you want proofs, do you? Well, they can easily be had. Whence come these insolent pamphlets which represent me as a monarch without glory or authority? Your press groans with them. If I had my secretaries here I would quote for you the titles of the works with the names of their printers."

"Sire," replied the ambassador, "a pamphlet is not the work of a nation. Is it fair for a great King like your Majesty to hold a great people responsible for the act of some miscreants who are starving to death?"

"Yes, I grant that, monsieur. But when the Mint of Amsterdam coins medals to my dishonor, is that too the act of madmen?"

"Medals?" stammered the ambassador.

"Medals," repeated the King, looking at Colbert.

"Your Majesty must be very sure —" hazarded the Dutchman.

The King still looked at Colbert; but the latter appeared not to understand and was silent, in spite of the provocation of the King. Thereupon D'Artagnan approached, and drawing from his pocket a coin which he handed to the King:

"Here is the medal your Majesty is looking for," said he.

The King took it, and saw, with those eyes which since he had been master had only looked into the heights, an insolent

image representing Holland stopping the sun, like Joshua, with the following legend :

"In conspectu meo, stetit sol."

"In my presence the sun is stopped!" cried the King, enraged. "You will not deny it, I suppose."

"And this is the sun," said D'Artagnan.

Whereupon he pointed to the sun on the panels of the cabinet, an emblem repeated and resplendent, which everywhere showed its superb motto: *"Nec pluribus impar."*

Louis' anger, augmented by the excitement of his own private grief, had no need of this added fuel in order to devour everything before it. In his eyes shone the light of a quarrel ready to break out. A glance from Colbert checked the rising storm.

The ambassador murmured excuses. He said that no inference was to be drawn from the vanity of nations; that Holland was proud at having, with so few resources, sustained her position as a great nation, even against mighty kings, and that if a little smoke had dazed his fellow-countrymen, he begged the King to forgive their condition.

Louis appeared to be seeking advice. He looked at Colbert, who remained unmoved; then at D'Artagnan, who shrugged his shoulders. This action was the throwing aside of the lock which kept in check the anger of the King, already long restrained.

Every one, not knowing to what that anger might lead, preserved a mournful silence. The second ambassador took advantage of it to begin his excuses.

While he was speaking, and while the King, who by degrees had become absorbed in his own personal thoughts, was hearing the anxious voice as a distracted man hears the plash of a water-fall, D'Artagnan, who had Saint-Aignan at his left, drew near and in a voice meant to arouse the King said :

"Have you heard the news, count?"

"What news?" said Saint-Aignan.

"Why, the news about La Vallière!"

The King gave a start, and involuntarily took a step in the direction of the two speakers.

"What has happened to La Vallière?" asked Saint-Aignan, in a tone that may easily be imagined.

"The poor child has entered a convent!" said D'Artagnan.

"A convent?" cried Saint-Aignan.

"A convent?" exclaimed the King, in the midst of the ambassador's harangue.

Then, under pressure of etiquette, he regained control of himself, but still listened.

"What convent?" asked Saint-Aignan.

"That of the Carmelites at Chaillot."

"Whom the devil did you hear it from?"

"From herself."

"Have you seen her?"

"I was the one who took her to the Carmelites."

The King did not lose a word of this; his heart throbbed and he began to change color.

"But why did she run away?" asked Saint-Aignan.

"Because the poor girl was driven from court yesterday," said D'Artagnan.

Scarcely had he uttered these words before the King made an imperious gesture.

"Enough, monsieur," said he to the ambassador. "Enough!"

Then approaching the captain, he asked:

"Who said that La Vallière has entered a convent?"

"M. d'Artagnan," said the favorite.

"Is that true?" asked the King, turning to the musketeer.

"As true as truth can be."

The King clinched his hands and turned pale.

"You added something else, M. d'Artagnan," said he.

"I do not remember, Sire."

"You added that Mademoiselle de la Vallière had been driven from court."

"Yes, Sire."

"And that is true, too?"

"Ask if it is not, Sire."

"Ask whom?"

"Oh!" said D'Artagnan, like a man excusing himself.

The King started up, leaving the ambassadors, ministers, courtiers, and politicians.

The queen mother rose; she had heard everything, or what she had not heard she had guessed.

Madame, weak from anger and fear, strove to rise as well as the queen mother, but she sank into her armchair, which she instinctively pushed back.

"Messieurs," said the King, "the audience is at an end. I will make known my answer, or rather my will, to Spain and Holland."

And with a second imperious gesture he dismissed the ambassadors.

"Take care, my son," said the queen mother, indignantly, "take care; you do not seem to be fully master of yourself."

"Ah, Madame," roared the young lion with a startling gesture, "if I am not master of myself I will be, I promise you, and of those who insult me too. Come, M. d'Artagnan!"

And he left the room in the midst of the amazement and the terror of all.

Louis descended the stairs and started to cross the courtyard.

"Sire," said D'Artagnan, "your Majesty is going the wrong way."

"No, I am going to the stables."

"That is unnecessary, Sire; I have horses all ready for your Majesty."

The King answered his servant by a look; but that look promised more than the ambition of three D'Artagnans would have dared to hope.

CHAPTER LXXV.

CHAILLOT.

ALTHOUGH they had not been bidden, Manicamp and Malicorne had followed the King and D'Artagnan. They were two very intelligent men; but Malicorne, from ambition, often arrived too early; Manicamp, from idleness, often too late. This time they arrived just on time.

Five horses were ready. Two were ridden by the King and D'Artagnan: two by Manicamp and Malicorne. A groom rode the fifth. The whole procession set off at a gallop.

D'Artagnan had actually chosen the horses himself — regular lovers' horses: horses which did not run, but which

flew. Ten minutes later the cavalcade, in a whirlwind of dust, arrived at Chaillot.

The King literally hurled himself from his horse. But rapidly as he accomplished the feat, he found D'Artagnan at the horse's bridle ahead of him. The King gave a nod of thanks to the musketeer and threw the bridle to the groom. Then he hurried to the vestibule and pushing open the door violently entered the parlor.

Manicamp, Malicorne, and the groom waited outside; D'Artagnan followed his master.

On entering the parlor the first object which struck the King was Louise, not kneeling, but crouched at the foot of a great stone crucifix. The young girl lay on the cold stone, scarcely visible in the dark room, which was lighted only by a narrow grated window half hidden by climbing vines.

She was alone and apparently lifeless, as cold as the stone on which she lay. When he saw her, the King thought she was dead, and gave a terrible cry which made D'Artagnan rush forward.

Louis had already put his arm about her, and together with D'Artagnan helped to raise the poor girl, whom the torpor of death had already seized. Louis lifted her in his arms, and with his kisses warmed her hands and her icy temples.

D'Artagnan rang a bell, whereupon the Carmelite sisters rushed in.

The holy women uttered scandalized shrieks at sight of the men carrying a woman in their arms. The Mother Superior hurried in with the others. But more worldly than even the court ladies, in spite of all her austerity, at first glance she had recognized the King from the respect shown him by those present, as well as from the masterful manner with which he thrust every one aside, and had withdrawn, which was her way of not compromising her dignity. But she sent by the nuns all kinds of cordials, Hungarian waters, and mint, ordering besides that the doors be closed.

It was time; the grief of the King was becoming noisy and hopeless. He had just decided to send for his physician when La Vallière recovered consciousness.

On opening her eyes the first thing she saw was the King at her feet. She probably did not recognize him, for she gave a mournful sigh.

Louis looked eagerly at her. Finally her wandering glance rested on him. She recognized him, and strove to wrench herself from his arms.

"What!" she murmured, "the sacrifice not yet accomplished?"

"Oh, no! no!" cried the King, "and it shall not be accomplished, I swear!"

She rose, weak and broken down as she was.

"But it must be," said she; "it must be; do not stop me."

"Let you sacrifice yourself! I!" exclaimed Louis; "never! never!"

"Good!" murmured D'Artagnan, "it is time to leave. The moment they begin to speak one need not listen."

D'Artagnan withdrew, and the lovers were alone.

"Sire," continued La Vallière, "not another word, I beseech you. Do not ruin the only future I can hope for, that is, my safety; do not sacrifice your own for a caprice."

"A caprice?" cried the King.

"Oh," said La Vallière, "now, Sire, for the first time I see clearly in your heart."

"You, Louise?"

"Yes, I!"

"Explain yourself."

"An incomprehensible, unreasonable fancy may for the time being seem a sufficient excuse to you, but you have duties which are incompatible with your love for a poor girl. Forget me."

"Forget you! I!"

"You have already done so."

"I will die rather!"

"Sire, you cannot love one whom you consented to kill last night in so cruel a manner."

"What do you mean? Explain."

"Why did you ask me yesterday morning to love you? Tell me, what did you promise me in exchange? Never to let a night go by without making up with me in case you were angry."

"Oh, forgive me, forgive me, Louise! I was mad with jealousy."

"Sire, jealousy is an evil thought, which crops up like a weed when once it is cut down. You will be jealous again,

and will succeed in killing me. Be merciful and let me die now."

"Another word like that, mademoiselle, and you will see me succumb at your feet."

"No, no, Sire. I know my value better. Believe me, and do not ruin yourself for a poor girl whom every one despises."

"Oh! tell me who accuses you! Who are they?"

"I have no complaints to make against any one, Sire; I accuse only myself. Adieu, Sire! You compromise me in speaking thus."

"Take care, Louise; in saying that you reduce me to despair. Take care!"

"Oh! Sire, Sire! Leave me with God, I beseech you."

"I will snatch you from God himself!"

"But in the first place," cried the poor girl, "snatch me from those ferocious enemies who have designs on my life and my honor. If you have strength enough to protect me, have enough to protect me; but no, she whom you love, they insult, they laugh at, and send away."

And the innocent girl, driven by her despair to making that accusation, threw up her arms and sobbed aloud.

"They drive you away!" cried the King. "That is the second time I have heard those words."

"Ignominiously, Sire. You see very well I have no protector but God, no consolation but prayer, no refuge but the cloister."

"You shall have my palace, my court. Oh, fear nothing, Louise; those who yesterday drove you away, to-morrow shall tremble before you. What have I said, to-morrow? Already this morning I have displayed anger and uttered threats. And I have not yet exhausted the mine. Louise! Louise! you shall be avenged cruelly. Tears of blood shall pay for your tears. Only tell me the names of your enemies."

"Never! never!"

"How can you expect me to strike, then?"

"Sire, your hand would turn aside from those whom you would have to strike."

"Oh, you do not know me!" cried Louis, exasperated. "Rather than retract I would burn my kingdom and curse my family. Yes, I would strike down even my own arm, if it were cowardly enough to refuse to annihilate everything hostile to the sweetest woman on earth."

As he spoke Louis struck his fist violently against the oaken partition, which gave forth a lugubrious sound.

La Vallière was frightened. The anger of this all-powerful young man had in it something imposing and sinister, because, like that of the tempest, it could be fatal. She, who thought her grief unequalled, was conquered by that grief which showed itself in threats and violence.

"Sire," said she, "for the last time I beseech you to go away; already the quiet of this convent has strengthened me. I feel myself calmer under God's hand. God is a protector before whom falls every petty human wickedness. Sire, once more, leave me with God."

"Then," cried Louis, "say frankly that you have never loved me; say that my humility, my repentance, flatter your pride, but that you are not moved by my grief. Say that the King of France is no longer for you a lover whose tenderness could make you happy, but a despot whose caprice has broken every feeling in your heart. Do not say that you seek God; say that you are fleeing from the King. No, God is no accomplice to inflexible resolutions; God admits penitence and remorse; he forgives, he wants us to love one another."

On hearing these words Louise was torn with emotion. They made her blood burn like fire.

"But did you not understand?" said she.

"What?"

"Did you not understand that I was driven away, scorned, despised?"

"I will make you the most respected, the most adored, the most envied at my court."

"Show me that you have not ceased to love me."

"How?"

"By leaving me."

"I will prove it to you by never leaving you."

"But do you think I could allow that, Sire? Do you think that I would let you declare war on your whole family? Do you think that for me I would let you discard another, wife, sister?"

"Ah, at last you have named them! So they are the ones who did the mischief! By God Almighty, I will punish them!"

"And that is why the future frightens me; that is why I refuse everything; that is why I do not want you to avenge

me! Enough tears! enough sorrow! enough complaints! Oh, never will I bring these upon any one, whoever it may be! I have grieved too much, wept too much, suffered too much myself!"

"And my tears, my pain, my complaints — do you count them as nothing?"

"Do not speak so to me, Sire, in Heaven's name! I need all my strength to fulfil my sacrifice!"

"Louise, Louise! I beseech you! command, order, avenge yourself, or forgive; but do not desert me!"

"Alas! we must part, Sire!"

"Then you do not love me?"

"Oh, God knows how much!"

"It is false, utterly false!"

"If I did not love you, Sire, I would let you do as you wish. I would let you avenge me. In exchange for the insult I have received, I would accept the sweet triumph you suggest! Whereas, as you see, I do not even desire the compensation of your love,— your love which is my life,— notwithstanding the fact that I wanted to die, thinking that you no longer loved me!"

"Yes, yes, I know it now! I realize it all. You are the holiest, the most pious of women. No one is as worthy as you, not only of my love and my respect, but of the love and the respect of every one. And no one shall be loved as you will be, Louise! no one shall have the influence over me that you will have. Yes, I swear, I would break the world like so much glass, if the world troubled me. You tell me to be calm, to forgive? Well, I will be calm. You wish to reign by gentleness and kindness? I will be gentle and kind. Merely tell me how I am to act, and I will obey!"

"Ah, what am I, a poor girl, to dictate one word to a King such as you?"

"You are my life and my soul! Does not the soul regulate the body?"

"Oh, you love me then, Sire?"

"On my knees, with clasped hands, with all the strength God has given me. I love you enough to give you my life gladly if you but say the word!"

"You love me?"

"Yes, yes."

"Then I have nothing else to wish for on earth. Your

hand, Sire, and let us say adieu! I have had in this life all the joy due me."

"Oh, no, say that your life is but beginning! Your happiness was not yesterday; it is to-day, to-morrow, forever! The future is yours; everything that I have is yours! Away with these ideas of parting, this sombre despair! Love is our God, it is the need of our souls. You shall live for me as I will live for you."

And sinking down before her, he kissed her knees with inexpressible transports of joy and gratitude.

"Oh, Sire! Sire! all this is a dream."

"Why a dream?"

"Because I cannot go back to court. Exiled, how could I see you any more? Is it not better to enter a convent and hide there in the joy of your love the last throbs of your heart and your last avowal?"

"Exiled! you!" cried Louis XIV., "and who exiles, then, when I recall?"

"Oh, Sire, something which reigns above kings — the world and public opinion. Reflect, you cannot love a woman who has been exiled; one on whom your mother has imposed a suspicion, one whom your sister has bowed under a chastisement, is unworthy of you."

"One who belongs to me, unworthy?"

"Yes, that is just it, Sire; the moment she belongs to you your mistress is unworthy."

"Ah! you are right, Louise, and you are delicacy itself. Well, you shall not be exiled."

"Oh! it is easy to see you did not hear Madame."

"I will appeal to my mother."

"Oh! you did not see your mother."

"She too? Poor Louise! So every one is against you, then?"

"Yes, yes, poor Louise, who was already bent beneath the storm when you came and completed her destruction."

"Oh, forgive me."

"You can influence neither the one nor the other; believe me, the evil is without remedy, for I will never suffer you to use violence or authority."

"Well, Louise, in order to prove how much I love you I will do one thing: I will go to Madame."

"You?"

"I will prevail on her to take back her sentence. I will force her to do this."

"Force her? Oh, no! no!"

"Then I will bend her."

Louise shook her head.

"I will implore, if necessary," said Louis. "Will you believe in my love after that?"

Louise looked up.

"Oh! never for me shall you humiliate yourself; let me die rather."

Louis pondered; his face assumed a gloomy expression.

"I will love you as much as you have loved me," said he. "I will suffer as much as you have suffered. This shall be my expiation in your eyes. Come, mademoiselle, let us leave these petty considerations; let us be great like our grief, strong like our love!"

And as he spoke he took her in his arms and held her close. "My only happiness! my life! Come with me!" said he.

She made a final effort, in which she no longer concentrated all her will-power, for that was already conquered, but all her strength.

"No!" she replied, weakly, "no, no! I should die of shame!"

"No, you shall return as a queen. No one knows of your having gone — only D'Artagnan."

"And so he betrayed me, too?"

"How so?"

"He swore —"

"I swore to say nothing to the King," said D'Artagnan, putting his handsome head in at the half-open door, "and I kept my word. I spoke to M. de Saint-Aignan; it was not my fault if the King overheard, was it, Sire?"

"No, and you will forgive him," said the King.

La Vallière smiled and held out her frail white hand to the musketeer.

"M. d'Artagnan," said the King, delighted, "send for a carriage for mademoiselle."

"Sire," replied the captain, "the carriage is waiting."

"Oh, you are a model servant!" cried Louis.

"It has taken time for you to find it out," murmured D'Artagnan, flattered, however, by the praise.

La Vallière was convinced. After some hesitation she let

herself be led away, helpless, by her royal lover. But at the parlor door, just as they were leaving, she broke from the arms of the King and went back to the stone crucifix. Kissing it, she murmured :

"My God ! Thou hast called me ; and Thou hast repulsed me. But Thy grace is infinite. Nevertheless, when I return do Thou forget that I ever went away ; for when I come back it will be never to leave Thee again."

The King could not restrain his emotion and D'Artagnan wiped away a tear. Then Louis led away the young girl, lifted her into the carriage, and putting D'Artagnan opposite her, mounted his horse, and spurred in the direction of the Palais-Royal. On his arrival he sent to ask Madame if she would accord him a moment's audience.

CHAPTER LXXVI.

MADAME.

FROM the way in which the King left the audience-hall the least clear-sighted could divine a war. The ambassadors themselves, but little informed as to private affairs, had understood as being levelled against them the celebrated words : "If I am not master of myself, I will at least be master of those who insult me." Fortunately for the destiny of France and Holland, Colbert had followed them in order to explain matters.

But when the queens and Madame, perfectly informed as to what was going on in their households, heard those threatening words, they withdrew in great fear and anger. Madame, especially, realized that the royal anger would fall on her, and since she was brave and excessively haughty, instead of seeking help from the queen mother, she retired to her own rooms, if not without anxiety, at least without any intention of avoiding the coming struggle. From time to time Anne of Austria sent messengers to ask if the King had returned.

The silence which the palace had preserved regarding the flight of Louise was the presage of many troubles caused by the proud and irritable disposition of the King.

But Madame held out against all these rumors, shut herself

up in her own apartment, summoned Montalais, and in a perfectly unmoved voice asked the girl to talk to her about the affair. Just as the eloquent Montalais ended with all sorts of oratorical precautions and was recommending to Madame, if not in actual words, at least in spirit, that she should show tolerance, M. Malicorne made his appearance to ask the princess for an audience.

Montalais' worthy friend bore on his face the marks of the liveliest emotion. It was impossible to be mistaken. The interview asked for by the King was to be one of the most interesting chapters in this history of the hearts of kings and of men.

Madame was troubled by her brother-in-law's arrival. She had not expected him so soon; in fact, she had not expected a direct attack on Louis' part.

Now women who are clever at indirect warfare are always less clever and less strong when it is a question of facing a battle.

Madame, as we have said, was not one to retreat — she possessed the opposite characteristic. She had an exaggerated idea of bravery; therefore this message from the King brought by Malicorne seemed to her like a trumpet sounding hostilities. She proudly picked up the gauntlet.

Five minutes later the King ascended the stairs. He was red in the face from having ridden fast. His dusty, disordered clothes contrasted strongly with the fresh, dainty toilet of Madame, who, in spite of her rouge, was pale.

Louis made no preamble; he sat down. Montalais withdrew. Madame seated herself opposite the King.

"Sister," said Louis, "you know that Mademoiselle de la Vallière ran away this morning, and that she took her grief and despair to a convent?"

As he spoke the King's voice was strangely soft.

"Your Majesty is the first to tell me this," replied Madame.

"I should have supposed that you had heard it this morning at the reception of the ambassadors," said the King.

"From your emotion, Sire, I imagined that something unusual had taken place, but I did not know just what."

The King was frank, and went straight to the point.

"Sister," said he, "why did you send away Mademoiselle de la Vallière?"

"Because her conduct displeased me," replied Madame, dryly.

The King grew red, and in his eyes there gathered a fire which all of Madame's courage could scarcely sustain. But he went on:

"A kind woman like you, sister, must have a very good reason for expelling and disgracing not only a young girl, but her whole family. You know that the city has its eyes open as to the conduct of the ladies at court. To dismiss a maid of honor is to attribute to her some crime, or at least some fault. What is the crime or the fault of which Mademoiselle de la Vallière is guilty?"

"Since you are Mademoiselle de la Vallière's protector," said Madame, coldly, "I will explain some things to you which I have the right to withhold."

"Even from the King himself?" cried Louis, with an angry gesture.

"You called me your sister," said Madame, "and I am in my own rooms."

"That makes no difference!" said the young monarch, ashamed of having lost his temper. "Neither you nor any one else, Madame, can say that he has the right to refuse to give me an explanation."

"Since you have that feeling," said Madame, in dull anger, "it only remains for me to bow before your Majesty, and keep silent."

"No, let us not equivocate."

"The protection you give to Mademoiselle de la Vallière does not compel respect."

"Let us not equivocate, I say; you know very well that as head of the nobility in France I ought to look after the honor of a family. Drive away Mademoiselle de la Vallière or any one else —"

Madame shrugged her shoulders.

"Or any one else, I repeat," continued the King, "and since you bring disgrace on this girl by so doing, I ask an explanation of you in order to confirm or to annul the sentence."

"Annul the sentence!" cried Madame, haughtily. "What! when I have dismissed one of my attendants you order me to take her back?"

The King was silent.

"That would show no great power, Sire, but an unseemly act."

"Madame!"

"Oh, as a woman I should revolt against an abuse beyond all dignity. I should no longer be a princess of the blood, a daughter of a king, but the lowest of creatures, more humbled than the servant who has been dismissed."

The King started up in fury.

"You have no heart," he cried, "if you act in such a way with me it may lead me to act with equal severity."

A random ball strikes home at times.

These words, uttered by the King without any ulterior motive, struck Madame and shook her for the moment. Some day she might fear retaliation.

"Well, Sire," said she, "explain what you desire."

"I ask, Madame, what Mademoiselle de la Vallière did against you?"

"She is the most artful intriguer I know; she caused two friends to fight a duel about her; she has made herself talked about in terms so disgraceful that the whole court frowns at the mere sound of her name."

"She! she!" cried the King.

"Beneath a gentle, hypocritical manner," continued Madame, "she hides a deep and scheming spirit."

"She!"

"You may be deceived, Sire, but I know her. She is capable of causing trouble among the nearest relatives and the most intimate friends. You see she has already sown discord between us."

"I protest —" said the King.

"Sire, listen to this: we used to understand each other. Now by her stories and false complaints she has turned your Majesty against me."

"I swear," said the King, "that a bitter word has never once escaped her lips. I swear that even in my anger she would let me threaten no one. I swear that you have no more devoted or more respectful friend than she is."

"Friend?" said Madame, with an expression of supreme disdain.

"Take care, Madame," said the King, "you forget that you understand me, and that from now everything is equalized. Mademoiselle de la Vallière shall be what I desire her to be."

To-morrow, if I so wished, she should be ready to occupy a throne."

"She is not born to it, at least, and you can act only for the future, not for the past."

"Madame, I have been kind and courteous to you. Do not make me remember that I am master."

"Sire, you have already said that twice. I have had the honor to tell you that I bow before you."

"In that case will you say that Mademoiselle de la Vallière may return to you?"

"Of what use, Sire, since you have a throne to offer her? I am of too little importance to protect one of such power."

"A truce to this evil, scornful spirit. Grant me a favor."

"Never!"

"You will drive me to open warfare with my family."

"I too have a family with whom I can take refuge."

"Is that a threat? Do you so far forget yourself? Do you suppose, if you were to carry the affront to that point, that your relatives would uphold you?"

"I trust, Sire, that you will force me to do nothing unworthy of my rank."

"I trust that you will remember our friendship, and that you will treat me as a brother."

Madame paused a moment.

"It is not disowning you for my brother," said she, "to refuse an injustice to your Majesty."

"An injustice?"

"Oh! Sire, were I to tell every one how La Vallière has acted,—if the queens knew—"

"Come, come, Henrietta, let your heart speak. Remember that you once loved me. Remember that the human heart ought to be as merciful as that of the Sovereign Master. Do not be inflexible with others; forgive La Vallière."

"I cannot; she has offended me."

"But for me?"

"Sire, for you I would do anything on earth but that."

"Then you drive me to despair. You make me turn to the last resort of the weak. You will drive me to anger and rage."

"Sire, I would advise you to be reasonable."

"Reasonable? Sister, I no longer can be so."

"Sire, for mercy's sake!"

"Sister, in pity! This is the first time I have ever begged. Sister, my only hope lies in you."

"Oh! Sire, are you weeping?"

"With wrath and humiliation, yes. To have to resort to entreaty — I, the King! All my life I shall hate this moment. Sister, in a single second you have made me suffer more anguish than I had foreseen in the greatest extremity in life."

And the King rose and gave full vent to his tears, which were, indeed, tears of anger and of shame.

Madame was not touched, for the best women have no pity in their pride; but she feared that the tears would carry away all the tenderness that lay in the King's heart.

"Command, Sire," said she; "and since you prefer my humiliation to your own, even though mine be public and yours has only myself for a witness, speak. I will obey the King."

"No, no, Henrietta!" cried Louis, carried away by gratitude, "you will have yielded to the brother."

"I no longer have a brother, since I obey."

"Do you want my whole kingdom in return?"

"How you love," said she, "when you love!"

Louis did not reply. He had taken her hand and was covering it with kisses.

"So," said he, "you will take back this poor girl, you will forgive her, you will realize the sweetness, the gentleness in her heart?"

"I will retain her in my household."

"No, you will give her your friendship, my dear sister."

"I never loved her."

"Well, for love of me you will treat her well, will you not, Henrietta?"

"I will treat her as your mistress!"

The King arose. By those fatal words Madame had destroyed the whole merit of her sacrifice. The King owed her nothing further. Mortally wounded, he replied:

"Thank you, Madame, I shall always remember the favor you have done me." And saluting her with affected formality, Louis took his leave. Passing before a mirror, he saw his red eyes and stamped his foot in anger. But he was too late. Malicorne and D'Artagnan, who were at the door, had seen his eyes.

"The King has been weeping," thought Malicorne.

D'Artagnan respectfully approached Louis.

"Sire," said he, in a low tone, "you must take the private stairway to return to your apartments."

"Why?"

"Because the dust of the road has left its traces on your face," said D'Artagnan. "Come, Sire, come! *Mordieux!*" he thought, "when the King gives way like a child, let them beware that bring grief to her who makes the King cry!"

CHAPTER LXXVII.

MADemoiselle DE LA VALLIÈRE'S HANDKERCHIEF.

MADAME was not evil-hearted — she was only angry.

The King was not rash — he was only in love.

Scarcely had the two made this sort of compact which ended in the recall of La Vallière before each strove to gain by it. The King wanted to see La Vallière every instant of the day. Madame, who had felt the King's anger ever since the scene in her room, would not give up La Vallière without a struggle. Thus she sowed difficulties in the path of the King.

In short, to see his mistress Louis was forced to pay court to his sister-in-law. In this plan lay Madame's entire policy.

As she had chosen some one to second her, and as this some one was Montalais, the King found that he was watched every time he went to Madame's. He was surrounded, and was never left alone. In her conversation Madame showed a grace and spirit which eclipsed everything. Montalais followed in Madame's steps, and soon became insupportable to the King.

That was what she had expected.

Then she sent Malicorne, who found a chance to say to the King that there was a very wretched woman at court. The King asked who it was. Malicorne replied that it was Mademoiselle de Montalais. Thereupon Louis answered that it was right for one to be unhappy who made others unhappy.

Malicorne explained that Montalais had had her orders.

The King opened his eyes. He noticed that Madame

appeared as soon as he appeared ; that she was in the corridors until after he had gone ; that she escorted him to the door for fear he might speak to some of the maids of honor in the ante-chambers.

One evening she went too far. The King was seated in the midst of the ladies, holding in his hand a note he wished to slip into La Vallière's hands. Madame saw the note, and divined his intention. It was very hard to prevent the King from doing what he thought best. But she must prevent his going to La Vallière, saying "How do you do" to her, and dropping the note in her lap, behind her fan or in her handkerchief.

The King was observant also, and suspected that she was laying a trap for him. He arose and unaffectedly moved his chair near Mademoiselle de Châtillon, with whom he began to jest. They were making verses. From Mademoiselle de Châtillon he went to Montalais, then to Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente. Then by a skilful turn he found himself seated in front of La Vallière, whom he completely hid.

Madame pretended to be very much occupied ; she was altering a flower design on a piece of tapestry. The King showed the corner of the white note to La Vallière, who opened her handkerchief as much as to say, "Put the note here." Then as the King had laid his own handkerchief on his chair, he was skilful enough to drop it, and La Vallière placed her handkerchief on the chair. The King took it unostentatiously, put the note in it, and laid it down again. There was wanting to La Vallière only the time to stretch out her hand and take the handkerchief with its precious deposit.

But Madame had seen everything. She said to Châtillon :

"Châtillon, kindly pick up the King's handkerchief from the floor."

The young girl obeyed at once. The King moved ; La Vallière grew anxious, and the other handkerchief became visible on the armchair.

"Ah ! pardon ! your Majesty has two handkerchiefs," said she.

And the King was obliged to put into his pocket La Vallière's handkerchief as well as his own. Thus he gained a souvenir from his loved one, but his loved one lost a quatrain which had cost the King ten hours, and which probably was worth a long poem to her.

Madame had contrived the anger of the King and the despair of La Vallière. It was indescribable.

But then there happened something unexpected. When the King left to return to his own rooms, Malicorne, who in some mysterious way had discovered how matters stood, was in the antechamber. The antechambers of the Palais-Royal are naturally dark, and in the evening there was but little formality at Madame's, consequently they were poorly lighted.

The King loved this half light. As a rule, love with which the mind and the heart constantly are flaming does not like light anywhere but in the mind and in the heart. So the antechambers were dark; a single page carried a torch before his Majesty.

The King was walking, slowly swallowing his anger.

Malicorne passed close to the King, almost touched him, and asked pardon of him in perfect humility; but the King in a very bad humor treated Malicorne badly, and the latter made his escape noiselessly.

Louis went to bed, having had that evening some little quarrel with the Queen, and the following day, as he passed through his cabinet, he felt a desire to kiss La Vallière's handkerchief.

He summoned his valet.

"Bring me," said he, "the coat I wore yesterday, but be careful to touch nothing in the pockets." The order was executed, and the King searched through all the pockets.

He found only one handkerchief, his own; La Vallière's had disappeared. While he was lost in conjectures and suspicions, a note from La Vallière was brought to him. It ran as follows:

"How kind you are, my dear lord, to have sent me those beautiful lines! How ingenious and persevering your love is! How could you fail to be loved?"

"What does that mean?" thought the King, "there is something wrong here." Then to the valet. "Try to find a handkerchief which must be in my pocket, and if you do not find it, or if you have touched it—"

He suddenly bethought himself. To make a state affair out of this handkerchief was to begin a whole series of explanations. He added:

"I had in that handkerchief an important note which had slipped into the folds."

"But, Sire," said the valet, "your Majesty had only one handkerchief, and here it is."

"That is true," replied the King, grinding his teeth, "that is true. Oh! poverty, how I envy you! Happy he who acts for himself and takes out of his pocket handkerchiefs and notes."

He re-read La Vallière's note, wondering how the verses could have reached their destination. The letter had the following postscript:

"I send by your messenger this reply, so little worthy of being sent."

"Good! I will discover something," said he, with joy. "Who is outside," said he, "and who brought this note?"

"M. Malicorne," replied the valet, timidly.

"Let him enter."

Malicorne appeared.

"Do you come from Mademoiselle de la Vallière?" said the King, with a sigh.

"Yes, Sire."

"And did you carry something from me to Mademoiselle de la Vallière?"

"I, Sire?"

"Yes, you."

"No, Sire."

"Mademoiselle de la Vallière says so."

"Oh, Sire, Mademoiselle de la Vallière is mistaken."

The King frowned.

"What is this little game?" said he. "Explain yourself. Why does Mademoiselle de la Vallière call you my messenger? What did you take to the lady? Speak, monsieur."

"Sire, I took a handkerchief to Mademoiselle de la Vallière. That is all."

"A handkerchief? What handkerchief?"

"Sire, I was unfortunate enough yesterday to run against your Majesty, a blunder I shall deplore all my life, especially after the displeasure you showed me on account of it; but just as I stood motionless from embarrassment, your Majesty being too far away to hear my apologies, I saw something white on the floor."

"Ah!" said the King.

"I stooped down and found it was a handkerchief. For a moment I thought that in running against your Majesty I had caused the handkerchief to drop from your pocket, but on looking closely, I saw a monogram. I examined more closely and found it was *Mademoiselle de la Vallière's* monogram. I supposed that on her way thither this young lady had dropped her handkerchief and so I hastened to return it to her. That is what I took to *Mademoiselle de la Vallière*, and I beg your Majesty to believe me."

Malicorne was so innocent, so hopeless, so humble, that the King took great pleasure in listening to him. He was as grateful to him for this lucky stroke as he would have been for the greatest service imaginable.

"This is the second fortunate meeting I have had with you, monsieur," said he; "you may count on my friendship."

The simple truth of the matter was that Malicorne had removed the handkerchief from the King's pocket as cleverly as a pickpocket in the good city of Paris would have done.

Madame was ignorant of all this. But Montalais hinted of it to *La Vallière*, who later told it to the King. Louis laughed heartily and proclaimed Malicorne a great politician. Louis XIV. was right, and we know he understood men.

CHAPTER LXXVIII.

IN WHICH ARE DISCUSSED GARDENERS, LADDERS, AND
MAIDS OF HONOR.

UNFORTUNATELY, miracles could not always last, while Madame's bad humor did. At the end of a week the King could no longer look at *La Vallière* without a suspicious glance crossing his. When a walk or a drive was suggested, in order to avoid a repetition of the scene of the storm or the royal oak Madame had some indisposition ready prepared. And thanks to that, she did not go out and her maids of honor also remained indoors.

There was not the slightest chance of a nocturnal visit, for

on the first occasion the King had experienced a severe check in this respect. As at Fontainebleau he had taken Saint-Aignan with him and had set out to pay La Vallière a visit. But he had found no one but Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente, who began to cry "Fire! Thieves!" in such a manner that a perfect legion of chamber-maids, attendants, and pages had appeared, and Saint-Aignan, who had remained behind in order to save the honor of his royal master who had fled, had received a severe scolding from the queen mother and Madame.

Moreover, the following day he had received two challenges from the Montemart family and the King had been obliged to interfere.

This mistake had arisen from the fact that Madame had suddenly ordered a change in the apartments of her maids of honor, and directed La Vallière and Montalais to sleep in her own cabinet. Nothing further, therefore, was possible, not even letters. To write under the eyes of so ferocious an Argus, whose disposition was as uncertain as Madame's, was to expose one's self to the greatest danger. It may be imagined in what a constant state of irritation and increasing anger all these annoyances threw the young lion.

The King racked his brain to discover some means of communication, and since he confided neither in Malicorne nor D'Artagnan the means were not forthcoming.

Malicorne occasionally had brilliant flashes of imagination, and strove to inspire the King with confidence, but whether from shame or suspicion the King, who at first had begun to nibble at the bait, soon left the hook.

For instance, one evening as Louis was crossing the garden, gazing sadly at Madame's windows, Malicorne stumbled upon a ladder hidden behind a boxwood hedge, and said to Manicamp, who was walking with him behind the King, oblivious as usual of his surroundings:

"Did you not notice that I just stumbled against a ladder, and came very near falling?"

"No," said Manicamp, still absent-minded; "but apparently you did not fall."

"Never mind. It is none the less dangerous to leave ladders lying about in that way."

"Yes, one might hurt one's self, especially if one were absent-minded."

"That is not the point. I mean that it is dangerous to leave ladders lying about beneath the windows of maids of honor."

Louis gave an almost imperceptible start.

"What do you mean?" said Manicamp.

"Speak louder," whispered Malicorne, pulling his sleeve.

"What do you mean?" said Manicamp, in a louder tone.

The King began to listen.

"Well," said Malicorne, "there, for instance, is a ladder nineteen feet long, just the right length to reach the cornice of the windows —"

Instead of answering, Manicamp began to dream again.

"Ask me what windows," whispered Malicorne.

"What windows do you mean?" said Manicamp, in a loud tone.

"Madame's."

"Oh!"

"I do not say that any one would dare to climb to Madame's rooms, but in her cabinet, separated simply by a partition, are Mesdemoiselles de la Vallière and de Montalais, both of whom are pretty."

"Simply by a partition?" asked Manicamp.

"Look, there's a bright light in Madame's apartments. Do you see those two windows?"

"Yes."

"And the window next to those lighted less brightly, do you see that?"

"Distinctly."

"That belongs to the maids of honor. It is warm. Look, there is Mademoiselle de la Vallière opening her window. Ah, what things a bold lover could say to her if he suspected that a ladder nineteen feet long were there, long enough to reach the window."

"But you said she was not alone, did you not? That she is with Mademoiselle de Montalais?"

"Mademoiselle de Montalais does not count. She has been a friend of La Vallière's from childhood, is perfectly devoted to her, and is a veritable well into which any secret one wishes to get rid of may be thrown."

The King had not lost a word of this conversation. Malicorne even noticed that his Majesty had begun to walk more slowly in order to give him time to finish. So on reaching the door Louis dismissed every one except Malicorne.

That was not surprising, for every one knew that the King was in love and supposed that he wanted to compose verses in the moonlight. Although there was no moon that night, nevertheless the King might wish to compose verse. Every one withdrew.

Thereupon, turning to Malicorne who was waiting respectfully, the King said:

"What were you saying just now about a ladder, M. Malicorne?"

"Did I say anything about a ladder, Sire?"

And Malicorne looked up to the sky as if to recall the words which had escaped him.

"Yes, a ladder nineteen feet long."

"Oh, yes, Sire, that is true, but I was speaking to M. de Manicamp, and I should not have said a word had I supposed that your Majesty could overhear us."

"Why not?"

"Because I do not wish to bring a scolding upon the gardener, who has forgotten it, poor devil!"

"You need not be afraid of that. But come, what sort of ladder is it?"

"Should your Majesty like to see it?"

"Yes."

"Nothing could be easier, Sire; it is right here."

"In the hedge?"

"Yes."

"Show it to me."

Malicorne turned back and led the King to where the ladder lay.

"Here it is, Sire," said he.

"Draw it out a little."

Malicorne placed the ladder in the path.

The King walked up and down beside it.

"Hum," said he, "you say that it is nineteen feet long?"

"Yes, Sire."

"Nineteen feet is a good deal. I do not think it is so long."

"It is hard to tell from where it lies, Sire. If it were on end against a tree or a wall, for instance, one could tell better."

"Oh, never mind, M. Malicorne, I can scarcely believe that the ladder is nineteen feet long."

"I know what an exact eye your Majesty has, and yet I would wager on this point."

The King shook his head.

"There is a sure way of finding out," said Malicorne.

"How?"

"Every one knows, Sire, that the first floor of the palace is eighteen feet from the ground."

"That is true."

"Well, by leaning the ladder against the wall of the palace you could judge."

"Yes."

Malicorne raised the ladder as if it were a feather, and placed it against the wall. He chose, or rather chance chose for him in order to help with his experiment, the window of La Vallière's room.

The ladder just reached the ledge so that a man of medium height, like the King for example, standing on the highest round, could easily communicate with the inmates of the room.

Scarcely had it been placed in position when the King, throwing aside all pretence, began to ascend the ladder, while Malicorne held it for him. But scarcely had he accomplished the half of his journey when some of the Swiss guard appeared in the garden and advanced directly towards him. The King hurriedly descended and hid himself in a clump of bushes.

Malicorne realized that he must sacrifice himself. If he were to hide they would search until they found some one, either the King or himself, probably both. Better let them find him. Consequently he concealed himself so carelessly that he was at once arrested. He was led to the guard house. There he gave his name and was immediately identified.

Meantime, creeping from bush to bush, the King reached the private door of his apartments, greatly humiliated and greatly disappointed, the more so since the noise of the arrest had drawn Montalais and La Vallière to their window, and Madame herself between two candles had appeared at hers asking what had happened.

Malicorne asked for D'Artagnan, who at once responded to the call.

In vain Malicorne strove to explain the situation, in vain D'Artagnan understood it, in vain these two clever and inventive minds tried to account for the adventure. Nothing

remained for Malicorne but to let it be thought that he had tried to enter Mademoiselle de Montalais' room as M. de Saint-Aignan had once been suspected of having tried to force Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente's door.

Madame was inflexible; in the first place, because if Malicorne had in fact wished to enter her apartment at night through the window and by means of the ladder in order to see Montalais, it was a punishable offence on Malicorne's part, and he must suffer accordingly. In the second place, if Malicorne, instead of acting in his own name had acted as an intermediary between La Vallière and one whom she need not name, his offence was still greater, since love, which is an excuse for everything, was not an excuse in this case.

Madame, therefore, made a great outcry, and had Malicorne dismissed from Monsieur's service, without reflecting, poor blind creature, that Malicorne and Montalais held her in their clutches by her visit to M. de Guiche, and by many other ways equally delicate.

Montalais was furious and wished to avenge herself at once, but Malicorne explained to her that the favor of the King was worth all the disgrace in the world, and that it was beautiful to suffer for his Majesty's sake. Malicorne was right, and so, although Montalais was equal to ten women in one, he brought her over to his opinion.

Then let us hasten to add that the King, on his side, helped to console them. In the first place he gave Malicorne fifty thousand francs as a compensation for his lost post. Then he took him into his own house, delighted to avenge himself thus on Madame for all she had made La Vallière and himself suffer.

But no longer having Malicorne to steal his handkerchief and measure ladders for him, the poor lover was in despair. There was no hope of his ever again getting near La Vallière so long as she remained at the Palais-Royal. All the rank and all the money in the world could not remedy that.

Fortunately, however, Malicorne was on the watch. He did so well that he met Montalais. It is true that on her part Montalais had done her best to meet Malicorne.

"What do you do at Madame's at night?" he asked the young girl.

"Why, I sleep at night," she replied.

"You sleep?"

"Certainly."

"But it is very bad to sleep; it is not right that with a sorrow like yours a girl should sleep."

"What sorrow have I?"

"Are you not in despair at my absence?"

"Why, no, since you have had fifty thousand francs given you, and a position with the King."

"Never mind; you are deeply grieved at not seeing me as you used to: you are in despair because I have lost Madame's confidence; come, is it not true?"

"Yes, very true."

"Well, this grief prevents your sleeping at night, and then you cry and sob, and blow your nose ten times a minute, and make as much noise as possible."

"But, my dear Malicorne, Madame cannot endure the least noise near her."

"I know perfectly well that she cannot endure any noise; and so I tell you that when she hears such crying she will make haste to turn you out of her room."

"I understand."

"That is fortunate."

"But what will happen then?"

"The next thing that will happen will be that La Vallière, finding herself separated from you, will rend the night with such groans and lamentations that she will show despair enough for two."

"Then she will be put into another room."

"Exactly."

"But into which room?"

"Which?"

"Now you are puzzled, M. Inventor."

"Not at all. Whatever room it is, it will always be better than Madame's."

"That is true."

"Well, begin your lamentations for me to-night."

"I shall not fail to do so."

"And give La Vallière a hint."

"Do not fear; she already cries enough to herself."

"Well, let her cry out loud."

And they separated.

CHAPTER LXXIX.

WHICH TREATS OF CARPENTRY, AND FURNISHES DETAILS
UPON THE METHOD OF CONSTRUCTING STAIRCASES.

THE advice given to Montalais was communicated to La Vallière, who saw that it did not lack wisdom, and who, after some resistance which rose rather from timidity than from indifference, resolved to carry it out.

This story of the two women weeping, and filling Madame's bedroom with sounds of lamentation, was Malicorne's masterpiece.

Since nothing is so probable as improbability, so natural as romance, this kind of "*The Thousand and One Nights*" succeeded perfectly with Madame. The first thing she did was to send away Montalais. Then three days, or rather three nights, afterwards she sent away La Vallière. The latter was given one of the small rooms over the apartments belonging to the gentlemen.

One story, that is, a mere floor, separated the maids of honor from the officers and gentlemen. A private staircase, placed under the surveillance of Madame de Navailles, led to them. For greater safety Madame de Navailles, who had heard of his Majesty's previous attempts, had the windows of the rooms and the openings of the chimneys barred.

Thus every means of security had been provided for Mademoiselle de la Vallière, whose room looked more like a cage than anything else.

When Mademoiselle de la Vallière was in her room — and she was often there, for Madame had had scarcely any use for her services since she knew she was under Madame de Navailles' care — Mademoiselle de la Vallière had nothing to do except to look through the bars of her window.

One morning as she was looking out as usual she saw Malicorne at an opposite window. He held in his hand a carpenter's rule, was surveying the buildings and doing some algebraic formulæ on a piece of paper. He was not unlike those workmen who from an end of an excavation raise the corners of a bastion or measure the height of the walls of a fortress.

La Vallière recognized Malicorne and nodded to him.

Malicorne replied by a low bow, and disappeared from the window.

She was surprised at this coldness, so foreign to the usually even disposition of Malicorne; but she remembered that the poor fellow had lost his appointment through her, and that he could not feel very kindly towards her since in all probability she would never be in a position to return what he had lost. She knew how to forgive offences and could all the more readily sympathize with misfortune.

La Vallière would have asked Montalais her opinion had Montalais been there, but she was absent.

It was the hour she usually attended to her correspondence. Suddenly La Vallière saw something thrown from the window where she had seen Malicorne, pass across the open space, between the bars of her window, and roll upon the floor. She advanced with curiosity towards this object and picked it up. It was a reel used for winding silk. Only instead of silk a piece of paper was wrapped around it.

La Vallière unrolled it and read :

"MADEMOISELLE: I am anxious to know two things: first, if the floor of your room is of wood or brick; second, how far your bed is from the window. Forgive my importunity, and be kind enough to answer me by the same way my note has reached you; that is, by means of the bobbin. But instead of throwing it into my room as I have thrown it into yours, which would be too hard for you, be good enough merely to let it fall. Believe me, mademoiselle, your most humble and most respectful servant,

"MALICORNE.

"Write the reply, please, on this note."

"Ah! poor fellow," cried La Vallière, "he must be mad."

And she directed towards her correspondent, whom she only half saw in the darkness of the room, a look full of affectionate compassion.

Malicorne understood and shook his head as much as to say :

"No, no, I am not mad; be easy."

She smiled doubtfully.

"No, no," he gesticulated, "my head is all right!" and he pointed to it.

Then moving his hand like a man who writes rapidly.

"Come, write," he gesticulated again, in a beseeching sort of way. Even were he mad, La Vallière saw no impropriety in doing what Malicorne requested of her, so taking a pencil she wrote:

"Wood."

Then she counted ten feet from the window to her bed and wrote:

"Ten feet."

Having done this, she looked at Malicorne, who bowed and signified that he was going to descend. La Vallière understood that it was in order to pick up the reel. She approached the window, and, according to Malicorne's instructions, dropped the bobbin.

It was still running along the pavement when Malicorne started after it, reached it and picked it up, and, beginning to examine it as a monkey does a nut, ran straight to M. de Saint-Aignan's apartments.

Saint-Aignan had chosen, or rather solicited, that his rooms should be as near as possible to the King's, as some plants seek the rays of the sun in order to develop more luxuriantly. His apartments consisted of two rooms in that part of the palace occupied by Louis XIV. M. de Saint-Aignan was proud of this proximity which afforded easy access to his Majesty, and furthermore the favor of some unexpected meetings.

At the moment with which we are now dealing he was engaged in having both his rooms magnificently carpeted, counting on the honor of frequent visits from the King; for since his passion for La Vallière his Majesty had chosen Saint-Aignan as his confidant, and could be without him neither day nor night.

Malicorne was admitted to the count's and met with no difficulties, because he had been favorably noticed by the King, and because the credit of one man is always a bait for others. Saint-Aignan asked his visitor if he had any news.

"Great news," replied the latter.

"Ah! ah!" said Saint-Aignan, curious like all favorites. "What is it?"

"Mademoiselle de la Vallière has moved."

"Are you sure?" said Saint-Aignan, opening wide his eyes.

"Yes."

"She was with Madame."

"Exactly ; but Madame became tired of her neighbor, and has installed her in a room directly over your future apartment."

"What! up there?" exclaimed Saint-Aignan in surprise, pointing to the upper floor.

"No," said Malicorne, "over there;" and he indicated the building opposite.

"Why do you say, then, that her room is above mine?"

"Because I am sure that yours ought naturally to be under La Vallière's."

At these words Saint-Aignan gave Malicorne such a look as La Vallière had already given him a quarter of an hour before. That is, he thought him mad.

"Monsieur," said Malicorne, "I wish to reply to your thought!"

"To my thought?"

"Yes; you did not clearly understand, apparently, what I meant."

"I admit that."

"Well, you know that below Madame's maids of honor are the rooms of the King's and Monsieur's gentlemen."

"Yes; since Manicamp, De Wardes, and others lodge there."

"Exactly. Well, monsieur, admire the strangeness of the coincidence. The two rooms intended for M. de Guiche are the very two rooms below those occupied by Mademoiselle de Montalais and Mademoiselle de la Vallière."

"Well; what then?"

"Well, then, these two rooms are empty, since M. de Guiche is wounded and ill at Fontainebleau."

"I assure you, my dear monsieur, that I cannot grasp your meaning."

"Well, if I had the good fortune to call myself Saint-Aignan I should guess at once."

"And what would you do?"

"I should at once exchange the rooms I am now occupying for those M. de Guiche is not using yonder."

"Could you think of such a thing?" said Saint-Aignan, disdainfully. "Abandon the chief post of honor, being near the King, — a privilege accorded only to princes of the blood, to dukes and peers! Why, my dear M. de Malicorne, allow me to say that you are crazy!"

"Monsieur," replied the young man, seriously, "you make two mistakes. I am called simply Malicorne, and I am not crazy." Then drawing a paper from his pocket: "Listen to me," said he, "and afterwards I will show you this."

"I am listening," said Saint-Aignan.

"You know Madame watches over La Vallière as Argus did over the nymph Io."

"Yes."

"You know that the King has tried, but in vain, to speak to the prisoner, and that neither you nor I have succeeded in procuring for him this good fortune."

"You certainly should know something of all this, my poor Malicorne."

"Well, what do you suppose would happen to the one whose imagination brought the lovers together?"

"Oh, the King's gratitude would be boundless."

"M. de Saint-Aignan!"

"Well?"

"Would you not be curious to taste a little of this royal gratitude?"

"Certainly," replied Saint-Aignan, "a favor from my master after I had done my duty would be most precious to me."

"In that case, look at this paper, M. le Comte."

"What is it? A plan?"

"Of the two rooms of M. de Guiche, which in all probability will be your rooms."

"Under no circumstances."

"Why not?"

"Because my own rooms are envied by too many gentlemen to whom I shall certainly not give them up: M. de Roquelaure, for instance, M. de la Ferté, and M. Dangeau."

"In that case I shall leave you, M. le Comte, and shall offer to one of these gentlemen the plan I have just shown you with its accompanying advantages."

"But why not keep them for yourself?" asked Saint-Aignan, suspiciously.

"Because the King will never honor me by paying me a visit openly, while he certainly would go to one of these gentlemen."

"What! the King would go to the rooms of one of these gentlemen?"

"Certainly he would; ten times instead of one. What!

You ask me if the King would go to an apartment which would bring him nearer to Mademoiselle de la Vallière?"

"Beautifully near, with a whole floor between them."

Malicorne unrolled the paper from the reel.

"M. le Comte," said he, "note, I beg you, that the floor in Mademoiselle de la Vallière's room is merely of wood."

"Well?"

"Well, get a workman, lock him into your room without his knowing where he has been brought, let him make a hole in the ceiling, and consequently in the floor of Mademoiselle de la Vallière's room."

"Great Heavens!" cried Saint-Aignan, as if dazzled.

"What do you think of it?" said Malicorne.

"That is a very bold plan, monsieur."

"It will seem very trifling to the King, I assure you."

"Lovers never think of danger."

"What danger do you fear, M. le Comte?"

"Why, such an opening will necessitate a terrible noise! The whole palace will resound with it!"

"Oh, M. le Comte, I am sure that the carpenter I shall select will not make the slightest noise. He will saw a hole six feet square with a saw covered with oakum, and no one, not even those in the next room, will know he is working."

"Ah, my dear M. Malicorne, you astound, you bewilder me."

"To continue," said Malicorne, quietly, "in the room, the ceiling of which you have cut open, you understand —?"

"Yes."

"You will put up a staircase, which will permit either Mademoiselle de la Vallière to descend to your room or the King to ascend to hers."

"But the staircase will be seen."

"No, for in your room it will be hidden by a partition, across which you can hang a curtain similar to that which covers the rest of the apartment. In mademoiselle's room it will be hidden by a trap-door which will be part of the floor itself, and which will open under the bed."

"Of course," said Saint-Aignan, whose eyes were beginning to shine.

"Now, M. le Comte, I need not make you admit that the King will often come into the room in which there is such a

staircase. I think that M. Dangeau, especially, will be struck with my idea, and I shall now go and explain it to him."

"But, my dear M. Malicorne!" cried Saint-Aignan, "you forget that you spoke to me about it first, and that consequently I have the right of priority."

"Do you wish for the preference?"

"Of course I do."

"The fact is, M. de Saint-Aignan, that it is a ladder I am giving you for your first promotion, and perhaps for even some good duchy."

"At least," said Saint-Aignan, red with pleasure, "it is a chance to show the King that he is not wrong in occasionally calling me his friend — a chance, my dear M. Malicorne, which I owe to you."

"And which you will not forget to remember?" asked Malicorne, smiling.

"I shall be delighted to remember it, monsieur."

"I, monsieur, am not the friend of the King, but his servant."

"Yes, and if you think that there is a blue ribbon for me in that staircase, I think there will be letters of nobility for you."

Malicorne bowed.

"Now it is only a question of my moving," said Saint-Aignan.

"I do not see that the King will object to it. Ask his permission."

"I shall go to him at once."

"And I shall go and get the carpenter."

"When shall I have him?"

"This evening."

"Do not forget your precautions."

"I shall bring him to you with his eyes bandaged."

"And I shall send you one of my carriages."

"Without coat-of-arms."

"With one of my lackeys without livery. That is understood."

"Very good, M. le Comte."

"But La Vallière?"

"Well?"

"What will she say to the work?"

"I assure you, she will be greatly interested in it."

"I believe so."

"I am even sure that if the King has not the audacity to ascend to her room, she will have the curiosity to descend to yours."

"Let us hope so," said Saint-Aignan.

"Yes, let us hope so," echoed Malicorne.

"I shall go to the King, then."

"And you do well."

"At what time will my carpenter be here?"

"At eight o'clock."

"And how long do you think he will need to cut the hole?"

"About two hours; only afterwards he will need time to finish what may be called the hyphen. One night and part of the following day; two days with the staircase."

"Two days is a long time."

"The deuce! when it means opening a door into paradise, the door must at least be decent."

"You are right. Good-bye for a time, M. Malicorne. I shall begin to move the day after to-morrow, in the evening."

CHAPTER LXXX.

THE TORCHLIGHT PROMENADE.

SAINT-AIGNAN, delighted at what he had just heard and at what he foresaw, set out towards the apartments of De Guiche.

He who a quarter of an hour previous would not have given away his two rooms for a million francs, was ready to buy for that sum if any one had asked him to do so, the two fortunate rooms he now coveted. But he did not meet with any great difficulty. M. de Guiche did not yet know where he would lodge, and besides he was still in too great pain to think about such things.

Saint-Aignan, therefore, had De Guiche's two rooms. On his part M. Dangeau had Saint-Aignan's two rooms at a premium of six thousand livres, and thought he had done well. Dangeau's rooms became the future lodging of De Guiche. All we can positively assert is that in this general moving these were to be De Guiche's rooms.

As for M. Dangeau he was so transported with joy that he

did not even take the trouble to think whether or not Saint-Aignan had any particular reason for removing.

One hour after he had made up his mind, Saint-Aignan was in possession of the two rooms. Ten minutes after that Malicorne entered Saint-Aignan's apartments escorted by the upholsterers.

Meantime the King was asking for Saint-Aignan. The valet ran to the latter's rooms and found Dangeau, who sent him to De Guiche's, where Saint-Aignan was found. But there had been some delay, so that the King had already given some signs of impatience when Saint-Aignan entered out of breath.

"So you too abandon me, do you?" said Louis XIV. to him in a tone of lamentation in which Caesar might have said "*tu quoque*" eighteen hundred years before.

"Sire," said Saint-Aignan, "I am not abandoning the King; on the contrary, I am busy moving."

"Moving? I thought you had finished that three days ago."

"Yes, Sire. But I am uncomfortable in my present lodgings, and so I am moving into the rooms opposite."

"I said you were abandoning me!" cried the King. "Oh! this is too much. There was only one woman for whom my heart longed, and my whole family has leagued together to snatch her from me. I had a friend to whom I confided my troubles and who helped me to bear them. Now this friend has grown weary of my complaints and leaves me without even asking my permission."

Saint-Aignan began to laugh. The King divined that there was some mystery in this want of respect.

"What is it?" said he, full of hope.

"This, Sire, that this friend whom the King calumniates is going to try to restore to the King the happiness he has lost!"

"Are you going to help me to see La Vallière?" asked Louis XIV.

"Sire, I cannot promise yet, but —"

"But?"

"I hope so."

"Oh, how? how? Tell me, Saint-Aignan. I must know your plan; I will do all I can to help you."

"Sire," replied Saint-Aignan, "I am not sure myself as yet how I am going to act in order to reach my object; but I have every reason to believe that from to-morrow —"

"To-morrow, you say?"

"Yes, Sire."

"Oh, what happiness! But why are you moving?"

"The better to serve your Majesty."

"And how can you serve me by doing that?"

"Do you know the situation of the two rooms intended for the Comte de Guiche?"

"Yes."

"Then your Majesty knows where I am going."

"No doubt; but that does not help me."

"What! Do you not understand, Sire, that above these rooms are two others?"

"Which ones?"

"One is that of Mademoiselle de Montalais, and the other —"

"The other is La Vallière's, Saint-Aignan."

"Come, now, Sire!"

"Oh, Saint-Aignan, it is true! it is, it is true! Saint-Aignan, it is a happy idea, a friend's idea, a poet's idea. By bringing me to her from whom the world seems to separate me, you are more to me than Pylades was to Orestes, or Patroclus to Achilles!"

"Sire," said Saint-Aignan, with a smile, "I wonder whether, if your Majesty knew my projects in their full extent, you would bestow such pompous qualifications on me. Ah, Sire, I know what trivial ones certain Puritans of the court will not fail to apply to me when they hear what I hope to do for your Majesty."

"Saint-Aignan, I am dying of impatience; I am in a perfect fever; I shall never be able to wait until to-morrow. To-morrow! Why, to-morrow is an eternity!"

"Yet, Sire, if you please, you can go out at once, and divert your impatience by a good walk."

"With you, yes; we will discuss your plans, we will talk of her."

"No, Sire, I shall remain here."

"Then with whom shall I go out?"

"With the ladies."

"No, indeed, Saint-Aignan."

"Sire, you must."

"No, no! A thousand times no! I will not subject myself to the horrible torture of being two feet from her, of

seeing her, of touching her dress as I pass, and yet not be able to say anything to her. No, I renounce this torture which you consider a pleasure, and which is a form of agony that burns away my eyes, devours my hands, and eats away my heart. To see her in the presence of all those strangers, and not tell her that I love her, when my whole being reveals my love and betrays me to every one! No, I have sworn never to do it again and I will keep my oath."

"Yet, Sire, listen to me."

"I will listen to nothing, Saint-Aignan."

"In that case I shall continue. It is most urgent, Sire, you understand, most urgent that Madame and her maids of honor be absent from the palace for two hours."

"You perplex me, Saint-Aignan."

"It is hard for me to give directions to a King; but under these circumstances I must do so, Sire. I must have either a hunt or a promenade."

"But this is a mere caprice, a whim! In showing such impatience I show my whole court that I have no control over my feelings. Is it not already said that I am dreaming of the conquest of the world, but that first I must begin by achieving a conquest over myself?"

"Those who say that, Sire, are impertinent and facetious. But whoever they may be, if your Majesty prefer to listen to them, I have nothing further to say. In that case that which we have arranged for to-morrow must be postponed indefinitely."

"Saint-Aignan, I will go out this evening. I will go by torch-light to Saint-Germain. I will breakfast there, and will return to Paris about three o'clock. Will that do?"

"Perfectly."

"Then I will leave this evening at eight o'clock."

"Your Majesty has divined the very minute."

"And you will tell me nothing?"

"That is, I can tell you nothing. Industry is something in this world, Sire; yet chance plays so important a part that I usually leave her the straiter path, sure that she will manage in such a way as always to take the wider."

"Well, I leave myself in your hands."

"And you do well."

Comforted in this way, the King went directly to Madame, to whom he announced the intended promenade.

For a moment Madame thought she saw in this unexpected plan a plot on the King's part to converse with La Vallière, either on the road under cover of the darkness, or in some other way; but she was very careful to show none of her feelings to her brother-in-law, and she accepted his invitation with a smile on her lips.

She gave directions aloud for her maids of honor to follow her, reserving to herself the privilege of taking the most effectual steps to interfere with his Majesty's love affair.

Then when she was alone, and when the poor lover, who had given his orders, was thinking that Mademoiselle de la Vallière was to be one of the party — just as he was mentally luxuriating on the sad happiness of persecuted lovers, of realizing through sight alone all the joys of forbidden possession, — Madame in the midst of her maids of honor was saying:

"Two ladies will suffice for me this evening: Mademoiselle de Tonnay-Charente and Mademoiselle de Montalais."

La Vallière had foreseen the blow and consequently was ready for it; but persecution had made her strong, and she did not give Madame the pleasure of seeing on her face any indication of the shock her heart had received. On the contrary, smiling with that ineffable sweetness which gave an angelic expression to her features, she said:

"Then, Madame, I shall be at liberty this evening?"

"Yes, certainly."

"I shall take advantage of it to work at the tapestry your Highness has been good enough to notice, and which I have already had the honor of offering to you."

And having made a respectful courtesy, she retired to her own apartment.

Mesdemoiselles de Montalais and de Tonnay-Charente did likewise.

The news of the intended promenade went with them, from Madame's rooms, and soon spread over the whole palace. Ten minutes later Malicorne knew Madame's resolution and slipped under Montalais' door the following note:

"*L. V. must spend the night with Madame.*"

In order to carry out the compact agreed on, Montalais began by burning the letter, and then sat down to reflect. Montalais was a girl of resource, and she had soon formed her plan.

At the hour she was to present herself at Madame's, that

is, about five o'clock, she ran across the court-yard and, on coming to within ten feet of a group of officers, she uttered a cry, fell gracefully on one knee, rose, and limped on. The gentlemen ran forward to her assistance. She had evidently sprained her ankle. Faithful, however, to her duty, she insisted on going to Madame's.

"What is the matter and why do you limp so?" asked the latter. "I mistook you for La Vallière."

Montalais related how in hurrying out she had met with the accident.

Madame seemed to be sorry for her and wished to have a surgeon sent for at once. But Montalais assured her that the accident was not at all serious, and said:

"Madame, I only regret having to fail in my duty to you, and I should have begged Mademoiselle de la Vallière to take my place —"

Madame frowned.

"But I did not do so."

"Why not?" asked Madame.

"Because poor La Vallière seemed so happy at the prospect of being free for one evening that I did not have the courage to ask the favor of her."

"Is she so happy?" asked Madame, struck by the words.

"Wildly so; she was singing, she who is always so sad. For that matter, your Highness knows that she detests the world, that she has in her an element of the savage."

"Oh!" thought Madame, "this great gayety does not seem to me to be natural."

"She has already made preparations," continued Montalais, "to dine in her own rooms alone with one of her favorite books. Besides, your Highness has six other young ladies who would be delighted to accompany you, so I did not make my proposal to Mademoiselle de la Vallière."

Madame was silent.

"Have I acted properly?" continued Montalais, with a slight tightening of the heart, seeing the small success of the ruse on which she had relied so confidently that she had not thought it necessary to invent any other. "Does Madame approve of me?" she continued.

Madame was reflecting that during the night the King could easily leave Saint-Germain, and since it was only four leagues and a half from there to Paris, he could be back in one hour.

"Tell me," said she, "on hearing you had been hurt, did not La Vallière at least offer her company?"

"Oh, she does not as yet know of my accident; but even if she did I certainly should not ask anything of her which might interfere with her plans. I think that she wishes to realize by herself this evening the amusement of the late King when he said to M. de Cinq-Mars: 'Let us be miserable, M. de Cinq-Mars, let us be very miserable.'"

Madame was convinced that some mysterious love affair was hidden behind this strong desire for solitude. It might be Louis' return during the night. It could no longer be doubted that La Vallière had been informed of his intended return. Hence her delight at remaining in the Palais-Royal.

It was all a preconceived plan.

"I will not be their dupe," said Madame.

And her mind was at once made up.

"Mademoiselle de Montalais," said she, "be kind enough to say to your friend Mademoiselle de la Vallière that I am in despair at upsetting her plan for solitude; but instead of being wretched by herself as she desired, she is to come and be wretched with us at Saint-Germain."

"Ah, poor La Vallière," said Montalais, sadly, but with joy in her heart. "Oh, Madame, is there no way that your Highness —"

"Enough," said Madame. "I wish it! I prefer the society of Mademoiselle la Baume le Blanc to that of any one else. Go now, send her to me, and take care of your ankle."

Montalais did not wait for a repetition of the command. She returned to her room, wrote an answer to Malicorne, and slipped it under the carpet. The note contained merely the words:

"She will go."

A Spartan could not have expressed himself more laconically.

"Thus," thought Madame, "I can keep watch of her on the way. She shall sleep near me at night, and his Majesty will indeed be clever if he can exchange a single word with Mademoiselle de la Vallière."

La Vallière received the order to leave with the same gentle indifference with which she had received the order to remain.

But inwardly her joy was great. She looked upon this change in the princess's resolution as a consolation vouchsafed her by Providence. Less penetrating than Madame, she attributed everything to chance.

While every one, with the exception of those in disgrace, those who were ill, and those who were suffering from sprains, was being driven towards Saint-Germain, Malicorne smuggled his workman into one of M. de Saint-Aignan's coaches and led him into the room corresponding to La Vallière's.

The man, tempted by the splendid reward promised him, set to work with a will.

As the very best tools and implements had been taken from the workmen attached to the King's household, — among them a saw with teeth so sharp that it was able even under water to cut through oak as hard as iron, — the work advanced rapidly. A square piece of the ceiling, cut out between two beams, fell into the arms of Saint-Aignan, Malicorne, the workman, and a confidential valet, — the last named being one of those brought into the world to see and hear everything, but to repeat nothing.

In accordance with the new plan indicated by Malicorne, the opening had been made in a corner of the room. For this reason, since there was no dressing-room in La Vallière's apartment, La Vallière had that very morning asked for and obtained a large screen to serve as a partition. The screen would conceal the opening, which for that matter could be hidden by some artifice of the cabinet maker.

The hole having been made, the workman squeezed between the joists and found himself in La Vallière's room. Once there he cut a square opening in the floor, and with the boards made a trap which fitted so exactly that the most practised eye could scarcely detect it. Malicorne had provided for everything. A ring and two hinges bought in advance were affixed to the trap-door.

A small circular staircase of the kind in use at that time had also been purchased by the indefatigable Malicorne, who had paid two thousand livres for it. It was higher than necessary, but the carpenter cut away some of the steps until it was exactly the right length. This stairway, destined to support so illustrious a weight, was fastened to the wall by a couple of iron clamps. Its base was fixed into the floor of the count's room by two iron pegs securely

fastened down, so that the King and his entire council might have passed up and down the stairway without fear.

Every blow of the hammer fell upon a thick cushion, and when the saw was used its handle was wrapped in wool and the blade steeped in oil.

Moreover the noisiest part of the work had been done during the night and the morning, that is, while La Vallière and Madame were absent.

When at about two o'clock the court returned to the Palais-Royal and La Vallière went to her room, everything was in order; not the slightest particle of dust, not the least chip, could bear witness to the violation of her apartment.

Saint-Aignan, however, who had been so anxious to do all he could in the work, had torn his fingers and his clothes and expended any amount of perspiration in the service of his King. Moreover the palms of his hands were covered with blisters, caused by his having held the ladder for Malicorne. He had, besides, brought up, one by one, the five pieces of the staircase, each consisting of two steps. Had the King seen him so hard at work, he would have sworn everlasting gratitude.

As Malicorne had predicted, the carpenter finished the work in twenty-four hours. He received twenty-four louis for it and went away filled with delight. It was as much as he usually made in six months.

No one had the least suspicion of what had taken place under the room of the maid of honor.

But the evening of the second day, just as La Vallière had returned to her own room from Madame's, she heard a slight creaking in the corner of the apartment. Suprised, she looked about to find out whence it came. The sound was repeated.

"Who is there?" she asked, in a frightened tone.

"I," replied the well-known voice of the King.

"You! you!" cried the young girl, who for an instant thought she was dreaming. "But where are you, Sire?"

"Here," replied the King, pushing back one of the panels of the screen and appearing like a ghost at the end of the room.

La Vallière gave a cry, and, trembling from head to foot, sank into an arm-chair.

The King advanced deferentially towards her.

CHAPTER LXXXI.

THE GHOST.

LA VALLIÈRE promptly recovered from her surprise. By his deferential attitude, the King inspired her with the confidence of which his appearance had deprived her.

But when he saw that that which made La Vallière uneasy was the means by which he had entered her room, he explained the system of the staircase hidden by the screen, disclaiming the fact that he was a ghost.

"No, Sire," said La Vallière, shaking her head with a charming smile, "present or absent you are in my thoughts just as much at one time as another."

"Which means, Louise —"

"Oh, what you well know, Sire, that there is not one instant when the poor girl, whose secret you surprised at Fontainebleau, and whom you came to take from the foot of the cross, does not think of you."

"Louise, you overwhelm me with joy and happiness."

La Vallière smiled sadly and continued:

"But, Sire, have you reflected that your ingenious invention cannot be of the slightest use to us?"

"Why not? Tell me."

"Because this room, Sire, may be searched at any time. Madame may chance to come in. In the daytime my companions come in frequently. To lock the door on the inside is to denounce myself as plainly as if I had written above: 'No admittance; the King is within!' Even now, Sire, there is nothing to prevent the doors being opened, and your Majesty discovered with me."

"In that case," said the King, laughing, "I should certainly be taken for a ghost, since no one can tell how I came here. Besides, only ghosts enter through walls or ceilings."

"Oh, Sire, what an adventure! Think of what a scandal it will be! Never has anything been said like it about the maids of honor, poor things, whom evil tongues never spare!"

"And you conclude from all this, my dear Louise — ? Come, explain yourself!"

"You must forgive me, Sire, it is a hard thing to say —"
Louis smiled.

"Come," said he.

"Your Majesty must suppress staircase plots and surprises, for the trouble of being caught here, Sire, would be greater than the pleasure of seeing each other."

"Well, my dear Louise," replied the King, tenderly, "instead of suppressing the staircase, there is a simpler means of which you have not thought."

"Another means?"

"Yes, another. Oh! you cannot love me, Louise, since I am more inventive than you."

She looked at him. Louis held out his hand, which she pressed gently.

"You say," continued the King, "that I shall be detected coming here, where any one who pleases can enter."

"Why, Sire, even now, while you are speaking about it, I tremble."

"Possibly; but you would not be found out if you were to descend the stairs to the room below."

"Sire, what do you mean?" cried La Vallière in alarm.

"You do not quite understand me, Louise, since you grow offended at my first word. In the first place, do you know to whom the rooms underneath belong?"

"Why, to M. de Guiche."

"No, to M. de Saint-Aignan."

"Really?" cried La Vallière. And this word which escaped from the young girl's joyous heart made the King's heart throb with delight.

"Yes, to Saint-Aignan, our friend," said he.

"But, Sire," said La Vallière, "I cannot visit M. de Saint-Aignan's rooms any more than I could M. de Guiche's."

"Why not, Louise?"

"It is impossible! Impossible!"

"It seems to me, Louise, that under the safeguard of the King one could do anything."

"Under the safeguard of the King?" said she, with a glance full of love.

"You trust my words, do you not?"

"Yes, Sire, when you are not present; but when you are, when you speak to me, when I see you, I trust nothing."

"What must I do to reassure you?"

"It is scarcely respectful, I know, to doubt the King, but for me you are not the King."

"Thank God! At least I hope so. You see how I am trying to remove all difficulties. Listen! Would the presence of a third person reassure you?"

"The presence of M. de Saint-Aignan? Yes."

"Really, Louise, you wound me by your suspicions."

La Vallière did not answer. She merely looked at Louis with that clear gaze which penetrates the very heart, and said in a low tone:

"Alas! Alas! It is not you I distrust—it is not you whom I suspect."

"Well," said the King, sighing, "I agree, then, and M. de Saint-Aignan, who enjoys the inestimable privilege of reassuring you, shall always be present at our interviews. I promise you."

"Really, Sire?"

"Upon my honor as a gentleman. And you, on your side—"

"Oh, wait. That is not all."

"Is there still something, Louise?"

"Yes; do not grow tired so soon, for we are not yet through, Sire."

"Well, finish hurting me."

"You see, Sire, these interviews must at least have some reasonable motive for M. de Saint-Aignan."

"Some reasonable motive?" said the King, in a tone of mild reproach.

"Yes; reflect, Sire."

"Oh, you are delicacy itself, and believe me, my sole desire is to be like you in this. It shall be as you wish, Louise. Our interviews shall have some reasonable object, and I have already thought of one."

"So that, Sire?" said La Vallière, smiling.

"So that from to-morrow, if you wish—"

"To-morrow?"

"Do you mean that it is too far distant?" cried the King, pressing La Vallière's burning hand between his own.

Just then steps were heard in the corridor.

"Sire! Sire!" cried La Vallière, "some one is coming! Do you hear? Run, Sire, run, I beseech you!"

The King made but one bound from his chair to the screen. It was high time. As he drew one of the panels before him the handle of the door turned and Montalais appeared at the threshold.

As a matter of course she entered quite naturally, and without ceremony. She knew perfectly well that to knock at the door before opening it would be showing an unpleasant suspicion towards La Vallière.

Accordingly she entered, and, after a rapid glance which embraced the two chairs side by side, she took so much time to close the door, which for some reason seemed to be hard to shut, that the King had plenty of time to raise the trap-door and descend again to Saint-Aignan's room.

A sound which could have been heard only by an ear as acute as hers told Montalais of the withdrawal of the prince. Finally she succeeded in closing the rebellious door, and approaching La Vallière, said :

"Come, Louise, let us talk seriously."

In her agitation Louise heard the word "seriously," on which Montalais had intentionally lingered, not without some inner alarm.

"Gracious! My dear Aure," said she, "what is the matter now?"

"My dear friend, Madame suspects everything."

"Everything?"

"Is there any need for us to enter into explanations? Do you not know what I mean? Come, you must have noticed Madame's change of humor for the past several days. You must have seen how she kept you with her, then sent you away, and then sent for you again."

"Yes; it has been strange, but I am accustomed to her whims."

"And you saw that Madame, after excluding you from the party yesterday, sent word for you to accompany her after all?"

"Yes; of course I noticed that."

"Well, it seems that Madame has now sufficient information, for she has gone straight to the point, having nothing left in France to stem the torrent which sweeps away all obstacles. You know what I mean by the torrent?"

La Vallière hid her face in her hands.

"I mean," went on Montalais, pitilessly, "the torrent which burst through the convent of the Carmelites at Chaillot and overthrew all the prejudices of the court both at Fontainebleau and at Paris."

"Alas! alas!" murmured La Vallière, still hidden behind her hands, while her tears fell between her fingers.

"Oh, do not grieve so, you have heard only half of your troubles."

"Oh, God!" cried the young girl, anxiously, "what more is there?"

"This: Madame, who is without further help in France, — for she has made use of both queens, of Monsieur, and the whole court, one after another, — has suddenly bethought herself of a certain person who claims to have a right to you."

La Vallière became as white as a waxen image.

"This person," continued Montalais, "is not in Paris at present."

"Mercy!" murmured Louise.

"Unless I am mistaken he is in England."

"Yes, yes," gasped La Vallière, almost overwhelmed.

"Is he not at the court of Charles II.? Tell me."

"Yes."

"Well, this evening a letter has been dispatched by a courier to Hampton Court, which, it seems, is the royal residence situated about a dozen miles from London."

"Yes; well?"

"Now, since Madame writes regularly to London every fortnight, and since the ordinary courier left for London only three days ago, I have been thinking that only something serious could have induced her to write again, for Madame, as you know, is a poor correspondent."

"Yes!"

"This letter, therefore, was written, something tells me, on your account."

"On my account?" repeated the wretched girl, mechanically.

"And I who saw the letter on Madame's desk before she sealed it thought I could read —"

"You thought you could read what?"

"Perhaps I was mistaken."

"What? Tell me."

"The name of Bragelonne."

La Vallière arose, a prey to the most painful agitation.

"Montalais," said she, in a voice broken by sobs, "all my smiling dreams of youth and innocence have fled. I have nothing to hide from you or from any one else. My life is like an open book which every one may read, from the King down

to the first passer-by. Aure, my dear Aure, what can I do? what is to become of me?"

Montalais drew near.

"Why, consult your own heart," said she.

"Well, I do not love M. de Bragelonne, and when I say this, pray understand me. I love him as the most devoted sister loves a good brother; but that is not what he asks of me; nor is that what I promised him."

"Well, you love the King," said Montalais, "and that is excuse enough."

"Yes, I love the King," murmured the young girl, dully, "and I have paid dearly enough for uttering these words. And now speak, Montalais. What can you do for or against me in my present position?"

"You must speak more clearly."

"What shall I tell you?"

"Have you nothing particular to tell me?"

"No," said Louise, in surprise.

"Very well. Then you merely want to ask my advice?"

"Yes."

"About M. Raoul?"

"Nothing else."

"It is a very delicate subject," replied Montalais.

"No, it is not at all so. Must I marry him in order to keep the promise I made; or must I continue to listen to the King?"

"You know very well you have placed me in a difficult position," said Montalais, smiling. "You ask if you ought to marry Raoul, whose friend I am, and whom I should mortally offend by deciding against him. Next you speak of listening no longer to the King, whose subject I am, and whom I should offend by advising you in a particular way. Ah, Louise, Louise, you think lightly of a difficult position! You have not understood me."

"Aure," said La Vallière, hurt by Montalais' slightly mocking tone, "if I speak of marrying M. de Bragelonne I should be doing so without giving him dissatisfaction; but for the same reason if I listen to the King he would become the possessor of one indifferent in many respects, it is true, but one to whom love lends a certain appearance of value. What I ask you, then, is to tell me a way to disengage myself honorably either from one or the other; or rather, I ask you from which you think I can free myself the more honorably."

"My dear Louise," replied Montalais after a moment's silence, "I am not one of the seven wise men of Greece, and I have no invariable rule of conduct; but on the other hand, I have a little experience, and I can assure you that no woman asks for advice of this kind without being greatly troubled as to what to do. Now you have made a solemn promise. You are honorable. If, therefore, you are embarrassed at having made such an engagement, it is not the advice of a stranger, — for every one is a stranger for a heart full of love. It is not, I say, my advice that can draw you out of your trouble. I shall not give it, therefore, especially, as, were I in your place, I should feel much more embarrassed after the advice than before it. All I can do is to repeat what I have already told you. Do you want me to help you?"

"Oh, yes."

"Well, that is all. Tell me in what way you want me to help you. Tell me for and against whom, so that we may not make a mistake."

"But in the first place," said La Vallière, pressing her companion's hand, "on whose side are you?"

"On yours, if you are really my friend —"

"Are you not Madame's confidant?"

"All the more reason for my being of use. If I knew nothing about that side I could not help you, and consequently you would gain nothing from my acquaintance. Friendship lives from mutual help."

"So at the same time you will be a friend of Madame's?"

"Evidently. Are you going to complain about it?"

"No," said La Vallière, pondering, for this cynical frankness seemed to her an insult to the woman and a wrong to the friend.

"Very good," said Montalais, "for if you did, you would be very foolish."

"So you will serve me?"

"Devotedly, especially if you will serve me in return."

"One would say you did not know my heart!" said La Vallière, looking at Montalais with wide-opened eyes of astonishment.

"Well, the fact is that since we have been at court, my dear Louise, we have greatly changed."

"How so?"

"It is very simple. Were you the second queen of France at Blois?"

La Vallière bent her head and began to weep.

Montalais looked at her in an indescribable manner and murmured :

"Poor girl!"

Then adding, after a moment's pause, "Poor King!" she kissed Louise on the forehead, and went back to her room, where Malicorne was awaiting her.

CHAPTER LXXXII.

THE PORTRAIT.

IN the malady called love the paroxysms follow one another at intervals, which grow shorter as the disease increases. Later the paroxysms are less frequent, as the cure begins to take effect.

This being laid down as a general axiom, and as the head of a particular chapter, let us proceed with our story.

The next day, the one fixed by the King for the first conversation in Saint-Aignan's room, La Vallière, on unfolding her screen, found on the floor a note in the King's handwriting.

This note had been passed through a slit in the floor, from the lower floor to the higher. No indiscreet hand or inquisitive gaze could have brought or did bring that simple bit of paper. It was an idea of Malicorne's. Seeing how serviceable Saint-Aignan would be to the King on account of his apartment, he did not wish the courtier to become still more indispensable as a messenger, and so he had on his own private account reserved this latter position for himself.

La Vallière read the letter eagerly. It appointed two o'clock that afternoon for the meeting, and explained how to raise the trap-door in the floor.

"Make yourself as lovely as you can," added the postscript.

The last words surprised the girl, but at the same time they reassured her.

The hours dragged slowly on, but the time arrived at last.

As punctual as the priestess Hero, Louise raised the trap.

door and found the King on the steps waiting for her with the greatest respect in order to give her his hand. This delicate attention touched her deeply.

At the foot of the stairs the lovers found the count, who with a smile and a most courteous bow thanked La Vallière for the honor she did him. Then turning to the King:

"Sire," said he, "our man has arrived."

La Vallière looked at Louis in some anxiety.

"Mademoiselle," said the King, "if I begged you to do me the honor to descend to my room, it was from interested motives. I have sent for a most excellent painter, who excels in portraits, and I want you to authorize him to paint yours. Besides, if you absolutely so desire, the portrait shall remain in your own possession."

La Vallière blushed.

"You see," said the King, "we shall not only be three, but four. Yes, indeed; the moment we cannot be alone there may be as many with us as you please."

La Vallière gently pressed the fingers of her royal lover.

"Come into the next room, if your Majesty will," said Saint-Aignan, opening the door.

His guests entered.

The King followed La Vallière, devouring with his eyes her throat as white as mother of pearl, on which her light golden curls lay in clusters.

La Vallière was dressed in a heavy pearl-gray silk, tinged with rose, with jet ornaments which set off the whiteness of her skin. Her slender, transparent hands held a bouquet of pansies, Bengal roses, and clematis, with tender leaves, above which, like a vase spilling perfumes, rose a Harlem tulip, gray and violet in hue, of a pure and beautiful species, which cost the gardener five years' labor of combinations, and the King five thousand livres. This bouquet had been given to La Vallière by the King as he met her.

In the room, the door of which Saint-Aignan had just opened, stood a young man with beautiful black eyes and long brown hair, and clad in a purple velvet jacket. It was the painter. His canvas was ready and his palette at hand.

He bowed to La Vallière with the grave curiosity of an artist who is studying his model, saluted the King discreetly as if he did not recognize him, and as he would have saluted any gentleman.

Then, leading Mademoiselle de la Vallière to a seat already prepared, he asked her to be seated.

The young girl did so freely, gracefully, her hands occupied and her limbs reclining on cushions, and in order that her gaze might not be vacant or affected, the painter asked her to choose some kind of occupation. Whereupon Louis XIV. smilingly seated himself on the cushions at the feet of his mistress. So that she, leaning back against the arm-chair, her flowers in her hands, and he with uplifted eyes fixed devouringly on her face, formed a charming group, which the artist contemplated for several moments with satisfaction; while for his part Saint-Aignan gazed at it with feelings of envy.

The painter sketched rapidly, and soon beneath the brush there stood out from the gray background the gentle, poetic face, with its soft eyes and rosy cheeks framed within masses of golden hair.

The lovers, however, spoke little, but they looked often at each other. Sometimes their eyes became so languishing that the painter was forced to interrupt his work in order to avoid representing an Erycina instead of a La Vallière. Then it was that Saint-Aignan came to the rescue, and recited verses or told stories such as Patrou told and Tallemant des Réaux wrote so well. Or La Vallière became weary, and they rested.

Immediately a china tray, laden with the most beautiful fruits that could be obtained, and rich wines, distilling their yellow hues in silver goblets, were brought in as accessories to this picture. Of all this the painter could trace only the barest outlines.

Louis was carried away with love, La Vallière with happiness, Saint-Aignan with ambition. The painter was storing up souvenirs for his old age.

Thus two hours passed. At four o'clock La Vallière rose and made a sign to the King. Louis went up to the picture and made some flattering remarks to the artist. Saint-Aignan praised the portrait, which he said was already a perfect likeness. La Vallière, blushing, thanked the painter, and passed into the next room, followed by the King, who had called Saint-Aignan.

"Until to-morrow, is it not?" he had said to La Vallière.

"But, Sire, are you sure that no one will come to my room and find me absent?"

"Well?"

"What would become of me?"

"You are very timid, Louise."

"But suppose Madame should send for me?"

"Oh," replied the King, "will the day never come when you yourself will tell me to brave everything so that I may never have to leave you again?"

"On that day, Sire, I shall be mad and you must not believe me."

"Until to-morrow, Louise."

La Vallière heaved a sigh, but without the courage to oppose the royal wish she said:

"To-morrow, then, since you wish it."

And with these words she ran lightly up the stairs and disappeared from her lover's gaze.

"Well, Sire?" asked Saint-Aignan when she had gone.

"Yesterday, Saint-Aignan, I thought myself the happiest of men."

"And does your Majesty regard yourself to-day," said the count, smiling, "as the unhappiest?"

"No, but my love is an unquenchable thirst; in vain do I drink, in vain do I swallow the drops of water which your industry procures for me; the more I drink the more thirsty do I become."

"Sire, that is partly your own fault. Your Majesty has created the position which you now occupy."

"You are right."

"In such a case, Sire, the way to be happy is to believe yourself so and to wait."

"Wait! Do you know what that word means?"

"There, there, Sire, do not despair. I have already worked for you and I will do so again."

The King shook his head sadly.

"What, Sire, have you not been satisfied, then?"

"Yes, indeed, my dear Saint-Aignan, but devise some other means."

"Sire, I will try to do so, that is all I can promise."

The King, unable to see the original, wished to look at the portrait again. He pointed out several alterations to the painter and departed.

Then Saint-Aignan dismissed the artist. The easel, paints, and painter had scarcely gone when Malicorne showed his

head in the doorway. Saint-Aignan received him with open arms, though with a certain sadness. The cloud which had passed before the royal sun veiled in turn the royal satellite.

At first glance Malicorne saw the melancholy on Saint-Aignan's face.

"Oh, M. le Comte," said he, "how gloomy you look!"

"I have good reason; my dear M. Malicorne. Will you believe that the King is not yet satisfied?"

"Not satisfied with his stairway?"

"Oh, no; on the contrary, the stairway has greatly pleased him."

"Is it the decoration of the rooms which he does not like?"

"Oh, so far as that is concerned he has not even thought of it. No, what has displeased the King —"

"I will tell you, M. le Comte. It is that he is the fourth person at a rendezvous. Why did you not guess it?"

"How could I guess it, my dear M. Malicorne, when I have only been carrying out the King's instructions."

"Did his Majesty really desire you to be present?"

"Positively."

"And did his Majesty desire also the presence of the painter whom I have just met downstairs?"

"He insisted upon it, M. Malicorne."

"In that case I can understand why his Majesty is dissatisfied."

"Dissatisfied because I have so promptly obeyed his orders? I do not understand you."

Malicorne scratched his ear.

"What hour did the King appoint for the rendezvous in your apartments?"

"Two o'clock."

"And you were in your room waiting for the King?"

"From half-past one."

"Indeed!"

"The deuce! It would have been a fine thing for me to be behindhand with his Majesty."

In spite of his respect for Saint-Aignan, Malicorne could not help shrugging his shoulders.

"And this painter? Did the King wish him to be here at two o'clock also?"

"No, but I had him waiting from noon. It is better, you

see, for a painter to be kept waiting for two hours than for the King to have to wait a moment."

Malicorne began to laugh silently.

"Come, my dear M. Malicorne," said Saint-Aignan, "laugh at me a little less and talk more."

"You insist upon this?"

"I request it."

"Well, M. le Comte, if you wish the King to be a little better pleased, the next time he comes —"

"He comes to-morrow."

"Well, if you want his Majesty to be better satisfied to-morrow —"

"*Ventre saint-gris!* as his grandfather used to say. If I wish it, — of course I do."

"Well, to-morrow, when it is time for the King to come, have some business on hand, something which cannot be postponed, something most pressing."

"Oh!"

"And stay away for twenty minutes."

"Leave him alone for twenty minutes?" cried Saint-Aignan, in alarm.

"Well, pay no attention to what I have said," said Malicorne, going towards the door.

"Yes, yes, my dear M. Malicorne. Finish what you were saying. I am just beginning to understand. But the painter?"

"Oh, he must be half an hour behind time."

"Half an hour! Do you think so?"

"Yes, I do."

"My dear monsieur, I will do as you say."

"And I think that you will be acting wisely. Will you allow me to come to-morrow for the latest news?"

"Certainly."

"I have the honor, M. de Saint-Aignan, to be your very respectful servant."

And Malicorne withdrew from the room backwards.

"That fellow has certainly more ideas than I have," said Saint-Aignan to himself, thoroughly convinced.

CHAPTER LXXXIII.

HAMPTON COURT.

THE revelation which we have seen that Montalais made to La Vallière, at the close of one of the preceding chapters, naturally brings us back to the chief hero of this tale, a poor knight wandering about at a king's caprice.

If our reader will be good enough to follow us, we will go with Bragelonne across that strait stormier than the Euripus, which separates Calais from Dover; we will cross that green and fertile country, with its thousand little streams around Charing, Maidstone, and ten other towns, each more picturesque than the other, and finally arrive at London.

Thence, like bloodhounds following a track, when we have ascertained that Raoul had made his first stop at Whitehall, his second at St. James, when we have learned that he had been received by Monk and introduced into the best society of Charles II.'s court, we will follow him to one of Charles' country houses, near the town of Kingston, at Hampton Court on the Thames.

At that point the river was not the proud highway which daily bore on its bosom half a million travellers, and upheaved its black waters, like those of Coeytus, as it says, "I, too, am the sea." No, it was only a softly-running stream, with mossy banks, reflecting in its broad mirror willow and beech, and some old wooden bark asleep among the reeds, in a creek of alders and forget-me-nots.

The surrounding country stretched out calm and fertile. The brick houses presented their chimneys, from which issued a bluish smoke, through a thick belt of green holly. Children, dressed in red frocks, appeared and disappeared amidst the tall grass like poppies bowed by the breath of a passing breeze. Great white sheep ruminated with closed eyes under the shadow of the dwarf aspens, and far and near the kingfisher, plumed with emerald and gold, skimmed like a magic ball along the surface of the water, heedlessly touching as he passed the line of his brother angler, who from his boat watched the tench and the shad.

Above this paradise of dark shadows and soft light rose the palace of Hampton Court, built by Wolsey, — a residence the

haughty cardinal had made desirable even for a king, and which — timid courtier that he was — he must perforce offer to his master Henry VIII., who had frowned with envy and cupidity at sight of the new castle.

Hampton Court, with its brick walls, its large windows, its beautiful iron gates, its many towers and curious bell turrets, its retired walks and inner fountains like those of the Alhambra, was a bower of roses, jasmine, and clematis. It was a delight both to sight and smell, and formed a most charming setting for the picture of love which Charles II. unrolled among the voluptuous paintings of Titian, Pordenone, and Vandyck; the same Charles who had in his gallery the portrait of Charles I., the martyr king, and who could show on his wainscoting the holes made by the balls the Puritan soldiers of Cromwell hurled, August 24, 1648, when they had led Charles I. a prisoner to Hampton Court. It was there that this king, always intoxicated with pleasure, held his court; this king who was by feeling a poet; this king who once so miserable had made up by a whole day of pleasure for every minute which had formerly passed in anguish and misery.

It was not the soft grass of Hampton Court, so soft that it resembled velvet, nor the flower-beds which encircled the foot of every tree with rose bushes twenty feet high opening like artificial sheaves; it was not the great lime-trees whose branches swept the earth like those of willows, offering a refuge for love or reflection within the shadow of their foliage; it was none of these things that Charles II. loved in his beautiful palace at Hampton Court.

Perhaps it was that beautiful sheet of water, like the waters of the Caspian sea, that great lake on which the cool breeze raised ripples like those of Cleopatra's hair; waters strewn with cresses and white lilies, with their sturdy roots revealing the golden germs concealed within the depths of their milky corollas; mysterious murmuring waters, over which black swans floated; where greedy water-fowl, with their tender broods covered with silken down, pursued green flies among the reeds, or frogs in their mossy retreats.

Perhaps it was the enormous hollies with their leaves of various hues; or the laughing bridges thrown across the canals; or the fawns browsing in the endless alleys; or the birds hopping about, flitting in the borders of boxwood and trefoil.

For there was all this at Hampton Court. There were besides groves of white roses, which climbed over high trellises in order to shower upon the ground their perfumed petals; there were in the park old sycamores with mossy trunks bathing their feet in moisture.

No. What Charles II. loved at Hampton Court were the charming figures who in the afternoons ran across the lawns. Like Louis XIV. he had had their beauty painted for his gallery by one of the greatest artists of his time, an artist who knew how to transfer to canvas the rays from so many beautiful love-lit eyes.

The day of our arrival at Hampton Court was almost as clear and bright as a day in France. The air was balmy; geraniums, sweet peas, syringas, and heliotrope, scattered in profusion over the lawn, exhaled their intoxicating perfumes. It was one o'clock. The King, on his return from hunting, dined, and paid a visit to the Lady Castelmaine, then supposed to be his mistress, and after this proof of his fidelity he was able, with perfect ease, to pursue his infidelities until evening.

The whole court was given up to amusement and love affairs. It was the period when ladies seriously questioned gentlemen as to their opinions upon this or that more or less charming foot, according as it was encased in a rose or a green silk stocking. It was the period when Charles II. declared that there was no safety for a woman without green silk stockings, because Miss Lucy Stewart wore them of this color.

While the King is endeavoring to make known his preferences on this point we will turn to an avenue of beech trees opposite the terrace, where a young lady, in a dark-colored dress, is walking with another, dressed in lilac and dark blue.

They crossed the lawn, in the midst of which rose a beautiful fountain, ornamented with bronze sirens, and strolled on chatting to the terrace, along which, from behind a brick enclosure, several summer houses of various styles of architecture looked out upon the park; but as the summer houses were, for the most part, occupied, the young girls passed on. One was blushing, the other was dreaming.

At last they reached the end of the terrace overlooking the Thames, and finding a cool retreat, they sat down together.

"Where are we going, Stewart?" said the younger to her companion.

"My dear Graffton, you see very well that we are going where you are leading us."

"I?"

"Yes, you. To the end of the palace towards that seat where the young Frenchman is waiting and sighing."

Miss Mary Graffton stopped short.

"No, no," said she, "I am not going there."

"Why not?"

"Let us go back, Stewart."

"No, on the contrary, let us go on and have an explanation."

"What about?"

"As to why the Vicomte de Bragelonne accompanies you on all your walks, and why you invariably accompany him on his."

"And you conclude either that he loves me or that I love him?"

"Why not? He is a delightful gentleman. No one hears me, I hope," said Miss Lucy Stewart, turning around with a smile which indicated, however, that her anxiety was not great.

"No, no," said Mary, "the King is in his oval cabinet with the Duke of Buckingham."

"Speaking of the Duke of Buckingham, Mary —"

"Well?"

"It seems to me that since his return from France he has become your knight. How is your heart in that direction?"

Mary Graffton shrugged her shoulders.

"Well, I shall ask the charming Bragelonne about that," said Stewart, laughing; "let us go at once and find him."

"Why?"

"I want to speak to him."

"Not yet, one word first. Come, Stewart, you know all the King's secrets —"

"You think so?"

"Well, you, if any one, ought to know them. Tell me why M. de Bragelonne is in England and what he is doing."

"Whatever a gentleman should be doing who has been sent from one sovereign to another."

"That may be, but seriously, although politics are not our strong point, we know enough about them to understand that M. de Bragelonne is here on no very important mission."

"Listen," said Stewart, with assumed gravity, "for your sake I am going to betray a state secret. Shall I repeat to you the letter which Louis XIV. gave M. de Bragelonne for his Majesty King Charles II.?"

"Yes, do."

"Well, this is it:

"*MY BROTHER: I send you a gentleman from my court, the son of one you love. Treat him kindly, I beg, and make him like England.*"

"Was that it?"

"Word for word, or very much like it. I will not answer for the form, only for the subject matter."

"Well, what do you or, rather, what does the King infer from it?"

"That the King of France has his own reasons for sending away M. de Bragelonne and for marrying him somewhere else than in France."

"So that in consequence of this letter —"

"King Charles received M. de Bragelonne, as you know, in the most royal and friendly manner. He has been given the most beautiful apartments in Whitehall, and as you are the most precious person at court inasmuch as you have rejected his heart — do not blush — he wished you to take a fancy to the Frenchman and to make him so beautiful a present as yourself. This is why you, the heiress to three hundred thousand livres, a future duchess, beautiful and good, have taken part in all the excursions at which M. de Bragelonne has been present. In short, it was a plot, a kind of conspiracy. If you wish it to succeed take this as a hint."

Miss Mary smiled with a charming expression which was habitual to her and pressing her companion's arm said:

"Thank the King for me."

"Yes, yes, but the Duke of Buckingham is jealous. Take care!" said Stewart.

Scarcely had she uttered these words when the duke himself came out of one of the summer houses on the lawn, and approaching the young girl with a smile, said:

"You are mistaken, Miss Lucy, I am not jealous. And the proof of this, Miss Mary, is that yonder is he who ought to be the cause of my jealousy, the Vicomte de Bragelonne, meditating alone, poor fellow! Permit me to surrender to him for a few

moments your gracious company while I speak with Miss Lucy Stewart."

Then bowing to Lucy :

"Will you do me the honor to take my arm in order that I may conduct you to the King, who is waiting for us?"

With these words Buckingham, still smiling, took Miss Lucy Stewart's hand and led her away.

Left alone, Mary Graffton, her head on her shoulder with that indolent grace which is characteristic of young Englishwomen, stood for a moment, her eyes fixed on Raoul, but as if uncertain what to do. At last, after first turning pale, then blushing, thus showing the struggle which was going on in her heart, she seemed suddenly to make up her mind, and with a tolerably firm step advanced towards the seat on which Raoul was sitting, buried, as we have said, in deep thought.

The sound of Miss Mary's steps, light as they were on the velvety lawn, aroused Raoul; he turned round, perceived the young girl, and went forward to meet the companion whom good fortune had thrown in his way.

"I have been sent to you, monsieur," said Mary Graffton. "Will you accept me?"

"And to whom are my thanks for so great happiness due, mademoiselle?" asked Raoul.

"To the Duke of Buckingham," replied Mary, affecting gayety.

"The Duke of Buckingham, who longs so passionately for your charming society! Can I believe you, mademoiselle?"

"The fact is, monsieur, as you see, that everything conspires to make us pass the best, or rather the greater, part of our days together. Yesterday it was the King who requested me to let you sit near me at table, to-day it is the Duke of Buckingham who begs me to come and sit by you."

"And he has gone away, leaving the place free for me?" asked Raoul in some embarrassment.

"Look yonder at the turn of the path. He is just disappearing with Miss Stewart. Are they so considerate in France, M. le Comte?"

"Mademoiselle, I cannot tell exactly what is done in France, for I am scarcely a Frenchman. I have lived in many countries, and almost always as a soldier. And then I have spent a great deal of time in the country — I am almost a savage."

"You do not like England, do you?"

"I do not know," said Raoul, absent-mindedly, with a deep sigh.

"Why do you not know?"

"I beg your pardon," said Raoul, shaking his head and collecting his thoughts. "I did not hear you."

"Oh," said the young girl, sighing in her turn, "how wrong it was of the Duke of Buckingham to send me here!"

"Wrong?" said Raoul, quickly. "You are right. My society is tiresome, and you must be bored with me. He certainly was wrong to send you here."

"It is just because I am not bored with you that the duke was wrong to send me," replied the young girl, with her calm, vibratory voice.

Raoul blushed.

"But," said he, "how did the Duke of Buckingham happen to send you to me, and how did you happen to come? The duke loves you and you love him —"

"No," replied Mary, seriously, "the duke does not love me, for he is in love with the Duchesse d'Orléans, and as for myself I have no feeling whatever for the duke."

Raoul looked at the young woman in astonishment.

"Are you a friend of the Duke of Buckingham's, vicomte?" she inquired.

"The duke has honored me by calling me his friend ever since we met in France."

"You are mere acquaintances, then?"

"No; for the duke is the very intimate friend of one whom I regard as a brother."

"The Comte de Guiche?"

"Yes, mademoiselle."

"The one who is in love with the Duchesse d'Orléans?"

"Oh! what do you mean?"

"And who is loved in return," continued the young girl, quietly.

Raoul bent his head, and Miss Mary Graffton went on with a sigh.

"They are very happy. But leave me, M. de Bragelonne, for the duke has given you a troublesome commission in offering me as a companion for your walk. Your heart is elsewhere, and you find difficulty in thinking of me at all. Confess this, vicomte. It would be unfair if you did not."

"Mademoiselle, I do confess it."

She looked at him.

He was so simple and so beautiful. His eyes had in them so much gentleness, candor, and resolution that it could not enter the head of any woman as distinguished as Miss Mary that the young man was either discourteous or a simpleton. She saw only that he loved another woman with the whole strength of his heart.

"Yes, I understand," said she. "You are in love with some one in France."

Raoul bowed.

"Does the duke know about it?"

"No one knows about it," replied Raoul.

"Why do you tell me, then?"

"Mademoiselle —"

"Answer me!"

"I cannot."

"It is for me, then, to anticipate an explanation. You do not wish to tell me anything because you are now convinced that I do not love the duke; because you see that perhaps I might have loved you; because you are a gentleman of feeling and of delicacy; and because instead of accepting — even were it but to amuse you for the moment — a hand that has been forced upon you, instead of giving me smile for smile, you who are young have preferred to say to me who am beautiful, 'I have left my heart in France.' Well, I thank you, M. de Bragelonne. You are a noble gentleman, and I like you all the better for it — as a friend. Now let us talk no more of myself, but of you. Forget that Miss Graffton has ever spoken to you of herself. Tell me why you are sad, why you have been even more so during the last few days."

Raoul was deeply moved by the sweet and melancholy tone. He could not find a word in answer, and the young girl again came to his aid.

"Pity me!" said she. "My mother was a Frenchwoman and I can truly say that I am French, too, in blood as well as in feeling. The fog and the gloom of England seem to weigh upon me. Sometimes my dreams are golden and full of wonderful happiness, but suddenly a mist rises and overclouds my fancies, which vanish forever. It has been so this time. Forgive me, I have said enough on this subject. Give me your hand and tell me your troubles as to a friend."

"You are French by birth and feeling, you say?"

"Yes; not only was my mother a Frenchwoman, but since my father, a friend of King Charles I., was exiled to France during the trial of that prince and during the life of the Protector, I was brought up in Paris. At the restoration of King Charles II. my poor father returned to England, where he soon died. Then King Charles made me a duchess and gave me a dowry."

"Have you relatives in France still?" asked Raoul, deeply interested.

"I have a sister, my senior by seven or eight years, who was married in France; she is now a widow. Her name is Madame de Bellière."

Raoul gave a start.

"Do you know her?"

"I have heard her name."

"She, too, is in love, and her latest letters tell me that she is happy. Therefore she must be loved. I told you, M. de Bragelonne, that I possess half of her nature, but I do not share her happiness. But let us speak of you. Who is it that you love in France?"

"A young girl as pure and white as a lily."

"But if she loves you, why are you wretched?"

"I have been told that she no longer loves me."

"But you do not believe it, I hope?"

"He who wrote me did not sign his letter."

"An anonymous denunciation! Oh, there is some treachery in that," said Miss Graffton.

"Wait," said Raoul, showing the young girl a note which he had read and reread a hundred times.

Mary Graffton took it.

"*Vicomte*," said the letter, "*you are right to amuse yourself in England with the lovely ladies around King Charles II., for at the court of Louis XIV. the stronghold of your affections is suffering a siege. Remain forever in London, poor vicomte, or return at once to Paris.*"

"No signature?" said Miss Mary.

"None."

"Do not believe it, then."

"Yes; but here is a second letter."

"From whom?"

"From M. de Guiche."

"Oh, that is another thing. What does it say?"

"Read."

"My friend, I am wounded, ill. Come back, Raoul, come back."

"DE GUICHE."

"What shall you do?" asked the young girl, with a tightening of her heart.

"On receiving the letter my idea was to take leave instantly of the King."

"When did you receive it?"

"Day before yesterday."

"It is dated from Fontainebleau."

"That is strange, is it not, for the court is at Paris? At all events I would have gone, but when I spoke to the King of my departure, he began to laugh, and said: 'How does it happen that you are leaving, Monsieur l'Ambassadeur? Has your sovereign recalled you?' I blushed, for I was embarrassed. As a matter of fact, my King sent me here, and I have received no order to return."

Mary pondered, frowning.

"And you intend to remain?" asked she.

"I must, mademoiselle."

"And she whom you love —"

"Well?"

"Does she write to you?"

"Never."

"Never? But does she not love you?"

"At least she has not written to me since my departure."

"Did she use to write to you?"

"Sometimes. I hope she may have been prevented."

"Hush! Here is the duke."

At that moment Buckingham appeared at the end of the walk, alone and smiling. He advanced slowly and held out his hand to the young people.

"Have you come to an understanding?" said he.

"About what?" asked Mary Grafton.

"About anything that might make you happy, dear Mary, and Raoul less miserable."

"I do not understand you, my lord," said Raoul.

"This is my opinion, Miss Mary. Do you want me to give it before monsieur?" and he smiled.

"If you mean," replied the young girl, proudly, "that I was ready to love M. de Bragelonne, it is quite useless, for I have told him so already myself."

Buckingham pondered, and, without losing countenance, as she had expected, continued:

"It is because I knew that you have delicate feelings and are a loyal friend that I left you with M. de Bragelonne, whose wounded heart might be healed by such a physician as yourself."

"But, my lord, before mentioning M. de Bragelonne's heart you spoke to me of your own. Do you want me to cure two hearts at once?"

"That is true, Miss Mary, but you will do me the justice to admit that I soon gave up a useless quest, recognizing the fact that my own wound was incurable."

Mary thought for a moment.

"My lord," said she, "M. de Bragelonne is happy. He loves and is loved in return. He has no need of such a physician as I."

"M. de Bragelonne," said Buckingham, "is on the eve of experiencing a serious misfortune and he has greater need than ever of sympathy."

"Explain yourself, my lord," said Raoul, quickly.

No, I shall explain myself only gradually, but if you so desire, I can tell Miss Mary what you yourself will not care to hear."

"My lord, you torture me. You know something?"

"I know that Miss Mary Graffton is the most charming object that a wounded heart could meet on its way through life."

"My lord, I have already told you that the Vicomte de Bragelonne's heart is elsewhere," said the young girl.

"He is wrong, then."

"You know that, M. le Duc? You know that I am wrong?"

"Yes."

"But whom does he love?" cried the young girl.

"He loves a lady who is unworthy of him," said Buckingham, in that calm, quiet manner peculiar to Englishmen.

Miss Mary Graffton uttered a cry which together with the

words of Buckingham brought to Bragelonne's cheeks a pallor caused both by surprise and alarm.

"Duke!" said he, "you have just spoken in such fashion that without an instant's delay I shall be obliged to seek an explanation in Paris."

"You will remain here," said Buckingham.

"I!"

"Yes, you."

"Why?"

"Because you have no right to leave; no one can leave the service of a king for that of any woman, even were she as worthy of love as is Mary Graffton."

"Then tell me what you mean."

"I will on condition that you remain here."

"I will do so if you speak to me frankly."

They had reached this point in the conversation, and Buckingham no doubt was about to tell, not everything that had happened, but everything he knew, when one of the King's valets appeared at the end of the terrace and approached the summer house in which the King was sitting with Miss Lucy Stewart. He was followed by a courier covered with dust, who looked as if he had but just dismounted from his horse.

"The courier from France! Madame's courier!" cried Raoul, recognizing the livery of the duchess.

The attendant and the courier were admitted to the King, while the duke and Miss Graffton exchanged a look full of meaning.

CHAPTER LXXXIV.

THE COURIER FROM MADAME.

CHARLES II. was engaged in proving or in trying to prove to Miss Stewart that he cared only for her, consequently he was promising her a love like that which his ancestor Henry IV. had felt for Gabrielle.

Unfortunately for Charles, he had chosen an unlucky day, a day on which Miss Stewart had taken it into her head to make him jealous. So instead of being touched by his offer, as the King had hoped, she began to laugh.

"Oh, Sire, Sire," she cried, merrily, "if I were unfortunate enough to ask you for a proof of your love, how easy it would be to see that you are telling a falsehood!"

"Listen to me," said Charles, "you know my cartoons by Raphael, and how much I care for them. They are the envy of every one, as you well know. My father had Vandyck buy them for him. Would you like me to have them sent this very day to your rooms?"

"Oh, no," replied the young girl; "pray keep them, Sire. My rooms are too small to accommodate such guests."

"In that case I will give you Hampton Court for the cartoons."

"Be less generous, Sire, and love longer; that is all I have to ask."

"I will love you always; is not that enough?"

"You are smiling, Sire."

"Do you want me to weep?"

"No; but I should like to see you a little more melancholy."

"Thank Heaven! my love, I have been so long enough; fourteen years of exile of poverty and misery. It seems to me my debt is paid. Besides, melancholy makes one so ugly."

"Not at all; look at the young Frenchman."

"The Vicomte de Bragelonne! Are you too taken with him? Odds-fish! They will all grow mad over him one after another. Besides, he has a reason for being melancholy."

"Why?"

"Ah, well, I shall have to tell you state secrets."

"You must if I wish it, for you said you would do anything I wanted."

"Well, he is bored in this country. There! are you satisfied?"

"He is bored?"

"Yes, which proves that he is a simpleton."

"A simpleton?"

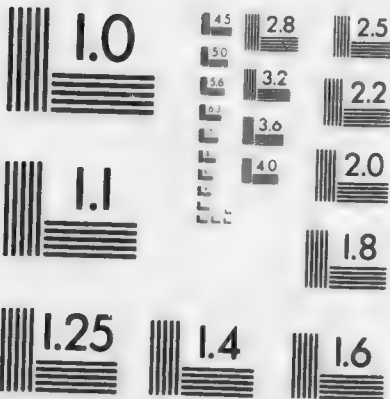
"Certainly. Can you believe it? I allow him to love Miss Mary Graffton, and he is bored!"

"Good! it seems, then, that if you were not loved by Miss Lucy Stewart, you would console yourself by falling in love with Miss Mary Graffton?"



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"I do not say that. In the first place, you know that Mary Graffton does not love me. Besides, one consoles himself for a lost love only by the discovery of a new love. But, as I said, it is not a question of myself, but of that young man. One might almost call the girl he has left behind him a Helen — a Helen before the coming of Paris, of course."

"But has this gentleman left some one, then?"

"That is to say, some one has left him."

"Poor fellow! so much the worse."

"What do you mean by 'so much the worse'?"

"Yes, why did he leave?"

"Do you think that he left of his own free will?"

"Was he forced to leave, then?"

"He left Paris under orders, my dear Stewart."

"Under whose orders?"

"Guess."

"The King's?"

"Exactly."

"Ah, you are opening my eyes."

"Say nothing about it, at least."

"You know very well that I am as discreet as any one. So the King sends him away?"

"Yes."

"And during his absence takes his mistress from him?"

"Yes. And will you believe it, the poor fellow, instead of thanking the King, is bemoaning his fate."

"Thank the King for depriving him of his mistress? Why, that is not a very gallant speech towards women in general and towards mistresses in particular, Sire."

"But pray understand me. If she whom the King is taking from him were a Miss Graffton or a Miss Stewart, I should be of his opinion, and I should not think him desperate enough. But she is a little, thin, lame girl. Devil take such fidelity! — as they say in France. The idea! To refuse one who is rich for one who is poor, a girl who loves him for one who is betraying him."

"Do you think that Mary seriously wishes to please the vicomte, Sire?"

"Yes, indeed, I do."

"Well, the vicomte will settle in England. Mary has a clear head, and when she wants a thing she wants it very much."

"My dear Miss Stewart, take care. The vicomte will live in our country, you say? It was not very long ago — only day before yesterday — that he asked my permission to leave it."

"Which you refused?"

"I should think so. The King, my brother, is too anxious for his absence, and as for me it is a matter of pride. It shall not be said that I have offered this young man the best and sweetest treasure in England —"

"You are gallant, Sire," with a pretty pout.

"I do not allude to Miss Stewart," said the King, "for she is worthy of a king's devotion; and since I have fallen in love with her, I trust no one else will follow suit. I say, therefore, that I will not have been kind to this young man in vain. He will stay with us, and will marry here, or may God damn me!"

"And I hope that, when once he is married, instead of being angry with your Majesty, he will be grateful to you; for every one is trying to please him, even the Duke of Buckingham, who, incredible as it may seem, appears to be eclipsed by him."

"Even Miss Stewart, who calls him a charming cavalier."

"Listen, Sire. You have praised Miss Graffton sufficiently to ensure my forgiveness for any praise of Bragelonne. But, by the way, Sire, for some time past your kindness has astonished me. You think of the absent, you pardon offenders, you are almost perfect. How does it happen?"

Charles II. began to laugh.

"It is because you let me love you," said he.

"Oh, there must be some other reason."

"Well, I want to oblige my brother, Louis XIV."

"Give me still another reason."

"Well, the real motive is that Buckingham recommended the young man to me, saying: 'Sire, I begin by resigning all claim to Miss Graffton in favor of the Vicomte de Bragelonne. Do likewise.'

"Oh, the duke is indeed a true gentleman!"

"There, there, now, let your head be turned by Buckingham! You evidently wish to drive me to the devil to-day."

Just then some one knocked at the door.

"Who dares to interrupt us?" cried Charles, impatiently.

"Really, Sire," said Stewart, "your 'Who dares?' sounds very foolish, and in order to punish you for it —"

She went to the door herself and opened it.

"Ah, it is a courier from France!" said Miss Stewart.

"A courier from France!" cried Charles. "From my sister, perhaps."

"Yes, Sire," cried the attendant, "a special messenger."

"Come in, come in," said Charles.

The courier entered.

"You have a letter from Madame la Duchesse d'Orléans?" said the King.

"Yes, Sire," replied the courier, "and so urgent a letter that I have taken only twenty-six hours to bring it to your Majesty, although I lost three-quarters of an hour at Calais."

"Your zeal shall be rewarded," said the King, opening the letter.

"Really," said he, bursting into laughter, "I cannot understand it."

And he reread the letter.

Miss Stewart had assumed a most reserved manner, trying to restrain her ardent curiosity.

"Francis," said the King to his valet, "look after this good fellow, and give him a bed. To-morrow when he wakes let him find a purse of fifty louis by his bedside."

"Sire!"

"Begone, my friend, begone. My sister was right to urge speed. The matter is most pressing."

And he began to laugh harder than ever.

The valet and Miss Stewart did not know what manner to assume.

"Ah!" said the King, throwing himself back in his arm-chair, "when I think that you have broken down — how many horses?"

"Two."

"Two horses to bring this news! That will do. You may go, my friend."

The courier withdrew with the valet.

Charles went to the window, opened it, and leaning out called:

"Duke! Duke! my dear Buckingham, come here."

The duke hastened to obey, but when he reached the door he saw Miss Stewart, and hesitated.

"Come in and shut the door, duke."

Buckingham obeyed, and, seeing the King's high spirits, came forward with a smile.

"Well, my dear duke, how are you getting on with your Frenchman?"

"Sire, I am in utter despair about him."

"Why so?"

"Because that adorable Miss Graffton is willing to marry him, and yet he does not wish it."

"Why! the Frenchman is a Bœotian, then!" cried Miss Stewart. "Let him say yes or no, and end the matter."

"But," said Buckingham, gravely, "you know, or you ought to know, mademoiselle, that M. de Bragelonne's heart is elsewhere!"

"In that case," said the King, coming to Miss Stewart's aid, "nothing is easier. Let him say no."

"I have proved to him that he made a mistake in not saying yes."

"You told him, then, that La Vallière has betrayed him?"

"Yes, in so many words."

"And what did he do?"

"He gave a start, as though to clear the channel at a bound!"

"Well," said Miss Stewart, "at least he has done something, and it is very fortunate, too."

"But," went on Buckingham, "I stopped him; I left him talking to Miss Mary, and I trust that now he will not go as he intended to do."

"He intended to leave?" cried the King.

"For an instant I doubted whether any human power could stop him. But Miss Mary's eyes are bent on him and he will remain."

"Well, that is where you are mistaken, Buckingham," said the King. "The poor fellow is predestined."

"Predestined to what?"

"To be deceived, which means nothing; though to look at him it means a good deal."

"At this distance and with Miss Graffton's aid the blow can be warded off."

"Not at all. There will be neither distance nor Miss Graffton's aid. Bragelonne will leave for Paris in an hour."

Buckingham made a gesture of surprise.

Miss Stewart opened her eyes.

"But, Sire, your Majesty knows that is impossible," cried the duke.

"That is to say, my dear Buckingham, that it is impossible until it happens."

"Sire, the young man is a lion."

"I can believe it, Villiers."

"His anger is terrible."

"I do not deny it, my dear friend."

"If he sees his misfortune at closer range, so much the worse for the author of it."

"So be it, but what would you have me do?"

"Were it even the King," cried Buckingham, "I would not answer for him."

"Oh, the King has musketeers to look after him," said Charles, quietly. "I know that, for I was kept waiting in his antechamber at Blois. He has M. d'Artagnan. He's a guardian indeed! I should make myself easy, you see, in the midst of twenty storms of anger like those of your Bragelonne, if I had four guardians like M. d'Artagnan."

"Oh, but I beg your Majesty, who is so kind, to reflect," said Buckingham.

"See," said Charles, handing the letter to the duke; "read it and tell me what you would do in my place."

Buckingham slowly took Madame's letter, and, trembling with emotion, read the following words:

"For your sake, for mine, for the honor and the safety of every one, send M. de Bragelonne back to France at once."

"Your devoted sister,

"HENRIETTA."

"What do you say to it, Villiers?"

"Why, Sire, I have nothing to say," replied the duke, stupefied.

"Would you," said the King, affectedly, "advise me not to obey my sister when she writes so urgently?"

"Oh, no, no, Sire! And yet —"

"You have not read the postscript, Villiers. It is under the fold and escaped me at first. Read it."

The duke turned down the fold which hid the line:

"A thousand remembrances to those who love me."

The duke turned pale and bent his head. The paper shook in his fingers as if it had turned into lead.

The King waited a moment, then, seeing that Buckingham remained silent, continued :

"He must follow his destiny as we ours. Every one suffers grief in this world. I have had mine, as well as that of those who belong to me. I have borne a double cross, but the devil take my cares now ! Go, Villiers, go, and bring this gentleman to me."

The duke opened the trellised door of the summer house and, pointing to Raoul and Mary who were walking side by side, said :

"Oh, Sire, what a cruel blow for poor Miss Graffton !"

"Come, come, call him," said Charles, bending his black brows. "Is every one sentimental here ? There is Miss Stewart wiping her eyes. The devil take the Frenchman ! Go !"

The duke called Raoul, and taking Miss Graffton by the hand led her to the summer house.

"M. de Bragelonne," said Charles II., "did you not ask me day before yesterday for permission to return to Paris ?"

"Yes, Sire," replied Raoul, greatly puzzled by these words.

"Well, my dear vicomte, I refused, I believe."

"Yes, Sire."

"And you were angry with me ?"

"No, Sire ; for your Majesty no doubt had excellent reasons for refusing ; your Majesty is too wise and too good not to do everything you do well."

"I alleged, I believe, this reason, that the King of France had not recalled you ?"

"Yes, Sire, that is what you said."

"Well, I have reflected, M. de Bragelonne ; if the King in fact did not fix your return, he begged me to make your stay in England agreeable ; but since you ask my permission to return, it is because your stay here is not agreeable to you."

"I do not say that, Sire."

"No," said the King, "but your request at least signified that another place would be more agreeable than this."

At that moment Raoul turned towards the door, against which Miss Graffton was leaning, pale and unnerved. Her other arm was on the duke's.

"You do not reply," pursued Charles. "The French proverb is plain, 'Silence gives consent.' Well, M. de Bragelonne, I can now satisfy you. You can leave for France whenever you please ; you have my authority."

"Sire!" exclaimed Raoul.

"Oh!" murmured Mary, pressing Buckingham's arm.

"You can be at Dover this evening," continued the King; "the tide is favorable at two o'clock in the morning."

Raoul, astounded, stammered a few words, which served the purpose both of thanks and of excuse.

"I therefore bid you adieu, M. de Bragelonne, and offer you every good wish," said Charles, rising; "you will confer a pleasure on me by keeping this diamond in remembrance of me. I had intended it as a marriage gift."

Miss Graffton was ready to faint. Raoul took the diamond, and as he did so he felt his limbs give way. He murmured a few complimentary words to the King, a compliment to Miss Stewart, and looked for Buckingham to bid him adieu. The King took advantage of this moment to disappear. Raoul found the duke engaged in keeping up Miss Graffton's spirits.

"Tell him to remain, mademoiselle, I beg you," whispered Buckingham.

"I shall tell him to go," said Miss Graffton, with returning animation. "I am not one of those women who have more pride than heart. If the beloved one is in France let him return to France, and bless me for having advised him to go and seek his happiness there. If, on the contrary, he is no longer loved let him come back again. I shall still love him, and his trouble will not have lessened him in my eyes. In the arms of my house there is that which God has engraven on my heart: '*Habenti parum, egenti cuncta*;' 'To the rich little, to the poor everything.'"

"I do not believe, my friend," said Buckingham to Raoul, "that you will find there the equivalent of what you leave here."

"I think, or at least I hope," said Raoul, gloomily, "that she whom I love is worthy of me. But if it be true that she is unworthy of me, as you have tried to make me believe, duke, I will tear her from my heart even though my heart breaks in the effort."

Mary Graffton looked at him with an expression of indefinable pity.

Raoul smiled sadly.

"Mademoiselle," said he, "the diamond which the King has given me was destined for you. Let me offer it to you. If I

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THE KING WATCHED THE PROGRESS OF LA VALLIÈRE'S PORTRAIT.

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marry in France, you will send it back to me; if I do not marry, keep it."

And he bowed and went away.

"What does he mean?" thought Buckingham, while Raoul pressed Miss Mary's icy hand with profound respect.

Miss Mary understood the look that Buckingham fixed on her.

"If it were a wedding-ring I would not accept it," she said.

"Yet you asked him to return to you."

"Oh! duke," cried the young girl, between her sobs, "a woman like me is never taken as a consolation by a man of his nature."

"Then you think he will not return?"

"Never!" said Miss Graffton, in a choking voice.

"Well, I tell you that in France he will find his happiness destroyed, his fiancée lost to him. His honor, even, has not escaped. What will be left him there equal to your love? Tell me, Mary, you who know yourself so well."

Miss Graffton laid her white hand on Buckingham's arm, and while Raoul was hurrying with headlong speed down the path beneath the lime-trees, she repeated in touching accents the line from "Romeo and Juliet":

"I must be gone and live, or stay and die."

As she finished the last word Raoul disappeared.

Miss Graffton returned to her rooms paler and more silent than death.

Buckingham profited by the arrival of the courier who had brought the letter to the King to write to Madame and to the Comte de Guiche. The King had been right. At two o'clock in the morning the tide was high, and Raoul embarked for France.

CHAPTER LXXXV.

SAINT-AIGNAN FOLLOWS MALICORNE'S ADVICE.

Louis XIV. watched the progress of La Vallière's portrait with a care arising as much from the desire to have it resemble her as from an idea of deferring as long as possible its completion.

He followed the painter's brush, awaiting the carrying out

of an idea or the result of some color combination, and suggesting to the painter various changes, to which the latter consented with respectful docility.

Then, when the artist, following Malicorne's advice, was a little late in arriving, when Saint-Aignan had some business requiring his attention, it was interesting to observe, though no one saw them, those expressive moments of silence which united in one sigh two souls wholly disposed to understand each other, and eager for quiet and meditation.

Then the minutes sped as if by magic. The King drew near his mistress and burnt her by the fire of his glance, the contact of his breath.

Suddenly a noise would be heard in the antechamber, the painter would arrive, Saint-Aignan would return with excuses, the King would begin to speak, La Vallière would answer him hurriedly, and from their eyes Saint-Aignan knew that in his absence they had lived a century.

In a word Malicorne, that unconscious philosopher, had learned how to arouse in the King an appetite in the midst of plenty and a desire in the certainty of possession.

That which La Vallière feared never happened.

No one guessed that during the day she was away from her room for two or three hours. She pretended that her health was uncertain. Those who went to her apartment always knocked before entering. Malicorne, the man of so many resources, had constructed an arrangement by which La Vallière when in Saint-Aignan's room could hear the steps of visitors going to her own apartment. So without going out, without having any confidant, she could return to her apartment, removing by her appearance, even if somewhat tardy, the suspicions of the most stubborn sceptics.

The next day after putting his latest scheme into effect, Malicorne had asked Saint-Aignan for news, and Saint-Aignan had been obliged to confess that the quarter of an hour's freedom had put the King into a most pleasant humor.

"We must double the dose," replied Saint-Aignan, "but little by little. Wait until they wish it."

They wished it so much, however, that on the evening of the fourth day, as the painter was putting together his materials before Saint-Aignan's return, the latter entering saw upon La Vallière's face a shade of disappointment which she could not hide. The King was less reserved, and showed his annoyance

by a very significant shrug of the shoulders, whereupon La Vallière blushed.

"Good!" said Saint-Aignan to himself. "M. Malicorne will be delighted this evening."

And such, in fact, was the case.

"It is very evident," said he to the count, "that Mademoiselle de la Vallière hoped that you would be at least ten minutes later."

"And the King that I would be half an hour later, my dear M. Malicorne."

"You would be a very poor servant of the King," replied the latter, "if you were to refuse the satisfaction of that half hour to his Majesty."

"But the painter?" objected Saint-Aignan.

"I will look after him," said Malicorne. "Only let me take counsel from faces and circumstances. Those are my implements of magic, and while sorcerers are enabled by means of their astrolabe to take the attitude of the sun, the moon, and the stars, I am satisfied by looking into people's faces to see if their eyes are encircled with black or if the mouth describes a convex or a concave arc."

"Observe, then!"

"Do not fear."

And the cunning Malicorne had every opportunity to observe, for that same evening the King went with the queens to Madame's apartments and had so long a face and uttered such deep sighs, gazing at La Vallière with such a languishing expression, that Malicorne said to Montalais during the evening:

"Wait till to-morrow!"

And he went off to the painter's house in the street of the Jardins Saint-Paul to request him to postpone the sitting for a couple of days.

Saint-Aignan was not in his rooms when La Vallière, now quite familiar with the lower story, raised the trap-door and descended. The King, as usual, was waiting for her on the stairway, holding a bouquet in his hand; as soon as he saw her he took her in his arms.

La Vallière, greatly affected, looked around and seeing no one but the King, did not complain. They sat down, Louis reclining near the cushions on which Louise sat, his head resting on her knees, as if in some place of refuge whence no one

could banish him. Thus he gazed at her and, as if the moment had come when nothing could come between these two souls, she on her side gazed at him.

And from her eyes, so soft and pure, emanated a flame whose rays first kindled and then inflamed the heart of her royal lover. Warmed by contact of the trembling limbs, trembling with happiness when Louise's hand rested on his hair, the King grew giddy from happiness, although he momentarily expected the return either of the painter or Saint-Aignan. At thought of this he strove to shake off the intoxication to which he was succumbing. He strove to put to sleep his heart and his senses, and thrust aside the reality to run after its shadow.

But the door was opened neither by Saint-Aignan nor by the painter. Not even did the hangings move. A mysterious, voluptuous silence reigned in the room, which seemed to affect even the birds in their gilded cage.

The King, overcome, turned his head, and buried his burning lips in La Vallière's clasped hands. She herself had grown faint, and pressed her trembling fingers against her lover's lips. Louis threw himself upon his knees, and as La Vallière had not moved her head, the King's forehead was on a level with her lips, and in her ecstasy she furtively passed her lips across the perfumed locks which caressed her cheeks. The King seized her in his arms, and, without any resistance on her part, they exchanged their first kiss — that burning kiss which changes love into delirium.

Neither the painter nor Saint-Aignan returned that day. A sort of intoxication, heavy yet sweet, which vivifies the senses, and like a slow poison introduces sleep into the veins, — that impalpable, languishing sleep, — fell like a cloud between the past and the future of the lovers.

In the midst of their ecstasy a noise was heard on the floor above. At first it aroused La Vallière, but did not wholly waken her. However, as it continued, as it made itself heard, as it recalled to reality the poor girl, drunk with illusion, she rose bewildered but beautiful in her disorder.

"Some one is waiting for me upstairs. Louis! Louis! Do you not hear?" she asked.

"Well, am I not waiting for you?" said the King, tenderly. "Let others wait for you in future."

But she gently shook her head.

"Happiness hidden!" said she, with a sob; "power concealed! My pride should be as silent as my heart."

The noise was again heard.

"I hear Montalais' voice," said she, and she hurriedly ascended the stairs.

The King followed, unable to let her leave him, and covering with kisses her hand and the hem of her robe.

"Yes, yes," repeated La Vallière, who was already half through the opening. "Yes, it is Montalais calling. Something important must have happened."

"Go, then, my dear love," said the King, "but return quickly."

"Oh, not to-day. Adieu! Adieu!" and she stooped down once again to kiss her lover, then she escaped.

Montalais was in fact waiting for her, very pale and agitated.

"Quick! quick!" said she. "He is coming."

"Who? Who is coming?"

"He! I was warned of it."

"But who? Tell me. You will kill me by keeping me waiting so!"

"Raoul," murmured Montalais.

"Yes, I, I," said a joyous voice on the last steps of the grand staircase.

La Vallière gave a terrible shriek and threw herself backwards.

"Here I am, Louise, dear," said Raoul, rushing in. "Oh, I well knew that you still loved me!"

La Vallière, with a gesture of terror and malediction, strove to speak, but could scarcely utter a word.

"No! no!" said she.

And she fell back into Montalais' arms, murmuring:

"Do not come near me!"

Montalais signed to Raoul, who stood as if petrified on the threshold, not even attempting to advance another step into the room. Then glancing towards the screen she ejaculated:

"Oh, the careless girl! She has not even closed the trap-door!"

And she advanced towards the corner of the room to adjust the screen and behind it the door. But suddenly from behind it came the King, who had heard La Vallière's cry, and was

hastening to her assistance. Throwing himself on his knees before her, he overwhelmed Montalais with questions. She was beginning to lose her head.

But just as he fell on his knees, a cry of despair rang through the corridor, and the sound of retreating steps was audible. The King ran to see who had uttered the cry, and whose were the steps.

In vain Montalais strove to retain him.

Leaving La Vallière, he went to the door, but Raoul was already at a distance, and all that Louis saw was a shadow that soon turned a corner of the hall.

CHAPTER LXXXVI.

TWO OLD FRIENDS.

WHILE every one at court was thinking of his own affairs, a man mysteriously took up his stand behind the Place de Grève in a house which is already known to us as having been besieged one day by D'Artagnan.

The principal entrance of this house was in the Place Baudoyer. It was rather large, was surrounded by gardens, inclosed in the Rue Saint-Jean by the shops of tool-makers, which protected it from inquisitive looks, and was walled by a triple rampart of stone, noise, and verdure, like an embalmed mummy in its triple coffin.

The man to whom we have referred walked with a firm step, although he was no longer in his first youth. His dark cloak and long sword plainly showed that he was one in search of adventure; and judging from his curling mustaches, his fine, smooth skin, which was visible beneath his sombrero, how could one fail to believe that his adventures savored of gallantry?

In fact, scarcely had the cavalier entered the house when eight o'clock struck from Saint-Gervais. Ten minutes later a lady, followed by an armed servant, knocked at the same door, which an old woman immediately opened for her.

On entering the lady raised her veil. She was no longer a beauty, but she was still a woman, no longer young, but still active, and of imposing appearance. Beneath a rich toilet,

most exquisite in taste, she concealed an age which Ninon de l'Enclos alone would have smiled at with impunity.

Scarcely had she reached the vestibule when the cavalier, whose features we have only sketched, came forward, holding out his hand.

"My dear duchess," said he.

"How do you do, my dear Aramis?" replied the duchess.

He led her to an elegantly furnished apartment, the high windows of which reflected the dying rays of the sun which filtered through the black tops of some firs.

They sat down side by side. Neither thought of asking for more light, but buried themselves in the shadow, as if they wished to bury themselves in forgetfulness.

"Chevalier," said the duchess, "you have never given me a sign of life since our interview at Fontainebleau, and I confess that your presence there on the day of the Franciscan's death, and your initiation in certain secrets, caused the liveliest astonishment I have ever experienced."

"I can explain my presence there as well as my initiation," said Aramis.

"But first of all," said the duchess, quickly, "let us talk a little of ourselves. We have been friends so long."

"Yes, madame, and if God so wills we shall continue to be friends, not for a long time, but forever."

"That is certain, chevalier, and my visit is proof of it."

"At present, madame, we have not the same interests we used to have," said Aramis, smiling without fear in the half light, for no one could see that his smile was less agreeable and less bright than formerly.

"To-day, chevalier, we have other interests. Every age brings its own; and as we now understand each other in talking as well as we once did without saying a word, let us talk. Will you?"

"I am at your orders, duchess. Ah, I beg your pardon, but how and why did you discover my address?"

"Why? I have told you — curiosity. I wanted to know what you had to do with the Franciscan with whom I had some business, and who died in so strange a manner. You know that during our interview at Fontainebleau, in the cemetery, at the foot of the grave so recently closed, we were both so moved that we could not say anything to each other."

"Yes, madame."

"Well, no sooner had I left you than I repented, and I have always been anxious to know about it all. You know that Madame de Longueville is very like me, do you not?"

"I did not know it," said Aramis, discreetly.

"I remembered then," continued the duchess, "that we had said nothing in the cemetery. You had not said what you had had to do with the Franciscan whose burial you superintended, and I had not spoken of what I was to him. All this seemed very unworthy of two good friends like ourselves; so I have sought an opportunity of an interview with you in order to give you the information I have acquired, and to tell you that Marie Michon, poor thing, is dead, but has left behind her one who remembers everything."

Aramis bowed over the duchess's hand, and pressed a kiss upon it.

"You must have had some trouble in finding me again," said he.

"Yes," she answered, annoyed at being brought to what Aramis wished to know, "but I knew you were a friend of M. Fouquet's, so I looked for him."

"A friend! Oh!" exclaimed the chevalier, "you use too strong a word, madame. A poor priest who has been favored by a generous protector, and whose heart is full of gratitude and devotion — that is all I am to M. Fouquet."

"He made you a bishop?"

"Yes, duchess."

"But, my handsome musketeer, that is your retiring pension."

"As political intrigue is yours," thought Aramis. "And so," he added, "you inquired for me at M. Fouquet's?"

"Very easily. You had been to Fontainebleau with him, and had made a little trip to your diocese, which is Belle-Isle, I believe."

"Oh, no, madame," said Aramis, "my diocese is Vannes."

"That is what I meant. But I thought that Belle-Isle —"

"Is a house belonging to M. Fouquet, that is all."

"Ah! I had been told that Belle-Isle was fortified. Now, I know that you are a soldier, my friend."

"I have forgotten everything military since I entered the church," said Aramis, annoyed.

"It is enough to know that I heard you had returned from Vannes, and I sent to a friend, M. le Comte de la Fère."

"Ah!" said Aramis.

"He was very discreet, and answered that he did not know your address."

"Always the same Athos," thought the bishop; "one who is good is always so."

"Then you know that I cannot show myself here, and that the queen mother always has some grievance against me."

"Why, yes, and I wonder at it."

"Oh! there are several reasons for it. But to continue: I was forced to hide myself, but fortunately met M. d'Artagnan, — one of your old friends, is he not?"

"One of my friends still, duchess."

"He gave me some information and sent me to M. de Baisemeaux, the governor of the Bastille."

Aramis gave a start, and from his eyes there flashed into the darkness a light which he could not conceal from his clear-sighted friend.

"M. de Baisemeaux!" said he; "why did D'Artagnan send you to him?"

"Oh, I do not know."

"What can it mean?" said the bishop, summoning all his thoughts to sustain the combat in a fitting manner.

"M. de Baisemeaux is your debtor, D'Artagnan told me."

"That is true."

"And the address of a creditor is known as well as that of a debtor."

"That too is true. And so Baisemeaux indicated to you —"

"Saint-Mandé, where I forwarded a letter to you."

"Here it is, and it is most precious to me," said Aramis, "since I am indebted to it for the pleasure of seeing you."

The duchess, satisfied at having successfully overcome all the difficulties of the explanation, breathed freely once more.

Aramis, however, could not do so.

"We had gone as far as your visit to Baisemeaux?" said he.

"No," said she, smiling, "farther than that."

"In that case we must have reached your bitterness against the queen mother."

"Farther still," said she, "farther still; we were speaking of the connection — with the Franciscan. Well, it is very simple," said she, taking up her rôle; "you know that I am living with M. de Laicques?"

"Yes, madame."

"A quasi-husband."

"So I have heard."

"At Brussels?"

"Yes."

"You know that my children have ruined and robbed me of everything."

"How terrible, duchess!"

"Terrible indeed. I had to resort to something in order to live, and particularly in order to keep myself from vegetating."

"Of course."

"I had old hatreds to turn to account, old friendships to make use of; I no longer had either credit or protectors."

"You, who had helped so many," said Aramis, suavely.

"That is always the case, chevalier. Well, at that time, I frequently saw the King of Spain."

"Ah!"

"Who had just nominated a general of the Jesuits, according to the usual custom."

"Is such the custom?"

"Were you not aware of it?"

"I beg your pardon. I was absent-minded."

"You ought to know that, since you were so intimate with the Franciscan."

"With the general of the Jesuits, you mean?"

"Exactly. Well, then, I had seen the King of Spain. He wished to do me a service, but could not. He gave me recommendations, however, to Flanders, both for me and for Laicques, and conferred on me a pension out of the funds belonging to the Order."

"Of Jesuits?"

"Yes. The general — I mean the Franciscan — was sent to me."

"Very good."

"And in order to conform with the requisitions of the statutes of the Order, I was reputed to be able to render certain services. You know that such is the rule."

"No, I did not know it," said Aramis.

Madame de Chevreuse paused to look at Aramis, but it was perfectly dark.

"Well, such is the rule," she resumed, "therefore I ought to seem to be of some use. I proposed to travel for the Order,

and I have been placed on the list of affiliated travellers. You understand that it was a formality for the sake of appearances ? ”

“ Splendid ! ”

“ In that way I received my pension, which was very convenient for me. ”

“ Great Heavens ! duchess, what you tell me is like a dagger-thrust. You obliged to receive a pension from the Jesuits ! ”

“ No, chevalier, from Spain. ”

“ Except for a matter of conscience, duchess, you will admit that it is about the same thing. ”

“ No, not at all. ”

“ But surely of your magnificent fortune there must remain — ”

“ Dampierre. That is all. ”

“ That is still very beautiful. ”

“ Yes ; but Dampierre is burdened, mortgaged, and almost a ruin, like its owner. ”

“ And can the queen mother see all that with dry eyes ? ” said Aramis, with a searching glance, which met only shadows.

“ Yes, she has forgotten everything. ”

“ You, I believe, duchess, tried to be restored to favor ? ”

“ Yes ; but by a strange coincidence the King inherits his father’s antipathy for me. Ah, you will tell me that I am indeed a woman to be hated and that I am no longer one to be loved. ”

“ Dear duchess, pray come quickly to what brought you here, for I believe that we can be of use to each other. ”

“ I have thought so, therefore I came to Fontainebleau with a twofold object. In the first place I was sent for by the Franciscan, whom you knew, — by the way, how did you know him ? I have told you my story, and yet you have not told me yours. ”

“ I knew him in a very natural way, duchess. I studied theology with him at Parma. We became friends, and were afterwards separated by business, or travel, or war. ”

“ You knew, of course, that he was the general of the Jesuits ? ”

“ I suspected it. ”

“ But by what strange chance did you happen to be at the inn when the affiliated travellers met there ? ”

"Oh," said Aramis, calmly, "it was by chance. I was going to Fontainebleau to M. Fouquet's to have an audience of the King. I was passing by, unknown, when I saw the poor dying man on the road, and recognized him. You know the rest; he died in my arms."

"Yes, but leaving to you so vast a power that you issue in his name sovereign orders."

"He did charge me with a few commissions."

"And for me?"

"I have told you. A sum of twelve thousand livres was to be paid to you. I think I gave you the necessary signature to enable you to receive it. Did you not get it?"

"Oh, yes, my dear prelate. You give your orders, I am told, with so much mystery and such august majesty that you are generally supposed to be the successor of the poor dead general."

Aramis colored with impatience. The duchess continued:

"I have been informed by the King of Spain," said she, "and he cleared up my doubts on that point. Every general of the Jesuits is nominated by him, and according to the statutes of the Order must be a Spaniard. You are not a Spaniard and you have not been nominated by the King of Spain."

Aramis answered merely:

"You see, duchess, how mistaken you are, since the King of Spain told you that."

"Yes, dear Aramis; but there is something else I have been thinking of."

"What is that?"

"You know that I think a little about everything."

"Oh, yes, duchess."

"Do you know Spanish?"

"Every Frenchman who has been engaged in the Fronde knows Spanish."

"You have lived in Flanders?"

"Three years."

"And you have stayed at Madrid?"

"Fifteen months."

"You are in a position, then, to become a naturalized Spaniard when you like?"

"You think so?" said Aramis, with a frankness which deceived the duchess.

"Undoubtedly. Two years' residence and an acquaintance

with the language are indispensable. You have three years and a half -- fifteen months more than is necessary."

"What are you driving at, my dear lady?"

"At this: I am on good terms with the King of Spain."

"I am not on bad terms," thought Aramis.

"Should you like me to ask the King to appoint you successor to the Franciscan?" continued the duchess.

"Oh, duchess!"

"You have it already, perhaps?" said she.

"No, upon my honor."

"Well, I can render you that service."

"Why did you not do it for M. de Laicques, duchess? He is a very talented man, and you love him, too."

"Yes, certainly; but that has nothing to do with it. Putting Laicques aside, will you have it?"

"No, I thank you, duchess."

She was silent.

"He is nominated," she thought.

"If you refuse me in this way," said Madame de Chevreuse, "it is not very encouraging in case I have something to ask of you for myself."

"Oh! ask, ask."

"Ask! I cannot, if you have not the power to grant my request."

"However limited my power, ask all the same."

"I need a sum of money to restore Dampierre."

"Ah!" said Aramis, coldly, "money? Well, duchess, how much?"

"Oh! a round sum."

"So much the worse. You know that I am not rich."

"No, but the Order is. If you had been general--"

"You know that I am not general."

"In that case you have a friend who must be rich-- M. Fouquet."

"M. Fouquet? Madame, he is more than half ruined."

"So it is said, but I did not believe it."

"Why, duchess?"

"Because I, or rather Laicques, has some letters from Cardinal Mazarin, which confirm the existence of strange accounts."

"What accounts?"

"In regard to sums of money borrowed and disposed of. I

do not remember exactly what they are. But they prove that, according to the letters signed by Mazarin, the superintendent had taken thirty millions from the coffers of the State. The case is serious."

Aramis dug his nails into his hands.

"What!" said he, "you have such letters and did not tell M. Fouquet about them?"

"Ah!" replied the duchess, "one keeps that sort of things in reserve. If the day comes when they are needed they can be drawn from where they are."

"And that day has arrived?" said Aramis.

"Yes, my dear friend."

"And you are going to show those letters to M. Fouquet?"

"I prefer to talk about them with you."

"You must indeed be in need of money, my poor friend, to think of such things as these — you who esteemed M. de Mazarin's prose so little."

"I certainly am in need of money."

"And then," continued Aramis, coldly, "it must have been very painful to you to resort to such means. It is cruel."

"Oh! had I wished to do harm instead of good," said Madame de Chevreuse, "instead of asking the general of the Order, or M. Fouquet, for the five hundred thousand livres I need —"

"Five hundred thousand livres!"

"No more. Do you think it much? It will take at least that to restore Dampierre."

"Yes, madame."

"I say, therefore, that instead of asking for this sum, I should have gone to my old friend the queen mother; the letters from her husband, Signor Mazarin, would have served me for an introduction, and I should have begged this trifle of her, saying: 'Madame, I wish to have the honor of receiving your Majesty at Dampierre. Permit me, therefore, to put my estate into proper condition.'"

Aramis said nothing.

"Well," said she, "what are you thinking about?"

"I am making certain additions," said Aramis.

"And M. Fouquet is making certain subtractions. I am trying to multiply. What fine calculators we are! How well we might understand one another!"

"Will you allow me time to reflect?" said Aramis.

"No, for with such an opening between people like ourselves, the answer must be an immediate 'yes' or 'no'!"

"This is a snare," thought the bishop; "it is impossible that Anne of Austria would listen to such a woman."

"Well?" said the duchess.

"Well, madame, I should be very much surprised if M. Fouquet had five hundred thousand livres at his disposal at the present moment."

"There is no use discussing it further," said the duchess, "and Dampierre will have to be restored as best it may."

"Oh, I trust you are not embarrassed so much as that!"

"No. I am never embarrassed."

"And," continued the bishop, "the queen will certainly do for you what the superintendent is unable to do."

"Oh, yes, indeed! But tell me, perhaps you would prefer my not speaking myself to M. Fouquet about these letters?"

"In that matter, you must do whatever you please, duchess; M. Fouquet either feels or does not feel himself guilty. If he is guilty, I know he is proud enough not to admit it; if he is not, he will be greatly offended at your menace."

"You always reason like an angel."

And the duchess rose.

"And so you are going to denounce M. Fouquet to the queen?" said Aramis.

"Denounce! Oh, what a disagreeable word! I shall not denounce, my dear friend. You understand politics too well not to know how these affairs are managed. I shall side against M. Fouquet; that is all."

"That is right."

"And in a party war, a weapon is always a weapon."

"No doubt."

"Once on friendly terms again with the queen mother, I may be a dangerous enemy."

"That is your privilege, duchess."

"I shall make use of it, my dear friend."

"You are not ignorant that M. Fouquet is on the best of terms with the King of Spain, are you, duchess?"

"I suppose he is."

"If you begin a party warfare against M. Fouquet, as you say you will, he will begin another against you."

"Well, what can you expect?"

"That is his privilege too; is it not?"

"Certainly."

"And as he is on good terms with Spain, he will turn that friendship into a weapon."

"You mean that he is on good terms with the general of the Jesuits, my dear Aramis."

"That may be, duchess."

"And that consequently the pension I have been receiving from the Order will be stopped."

"I fear so."

"Well, I must console myself. For after Richelieu, after the Fronde, after exile, what is there for Madame de Chevreuse to fear?"

"The pension, you know, is forty-eight thousand francs."

"Alas! I am quite aware of it."

"Moreover, in party contests, you know the friends of the enemy are aimed at."

"Ah! you mean that they will fall on poor Laicques?"

"That is almost inevitable, duchess."

"Oh, he receives only twelve thousand livres' pension."

"Yes; but the King of Spain has some influence; advised by M. Fouquet, he might get M. Laicques shut up in some prison."

"I have no great fear of that, my dear friend, because once reconciled with Anne of Austria, I would undertake that France demand M. Laicques' freedom."

"True. In that case you will have something else to fear."

"What is that?" said the duchess, pretending to be surprised and alarmed.

"You will learn, — and you must know it already — that having once been an affiliated member of the Order it is not easy to leave it. The secrets one may have acquired are unwholesome; they carry with them the germs of misfortune for whomsoever may reveal them."

The duchess pondered a moment.

"That is more serious," said she. "I will think it over," and notwithstanding the profound darkness Aramis felt a glance as burning as red-hot iron escape from his friend's eyes and plunge into his heart.

"Let us recapitulate," said Aramis, holding himself on his guard, and slipping his hand into his doublet, where a dagger lay concealed.

"Yes, let us recapitulate. Short accounts make long friends."

"The suppression of your pension —"

"Forty-eight thousand livres and that of Laicques', twelve, make sixty thousand; that is what you mean, is it not?"

"Precisely, and I am trying to find out your equivalent for that."

"Five hundred thousand livres which I shall get from the queen."

"Or which you will not get."

"I know a means of procuring them," said the duchess, thoughtlessly.

These words made the chevalier prick up his ears. From the moment his adversary made this mistake his mind was so thoroughly on its guard that every moment he gained the advantage, and she consequently lost it.

"Admitted that you may obtain this money," said he, "you will lose twice as much, having one hundred thousand francs' pension for ten years instead of sixty thousand for life."

"No, for I shall suffer this diminution of revenue only during the administration of M. Fouquet, which, I think, will last but two months."

"Ah!" said Aramis.

"I am frank, you see."

"I thank you for it, duchess; but you would be wrong to suppose that, after M. Fouquet's disgrace, the Order would resume the payment of your pension."

"I know a way to make the Order pay as I know a way to make the queen mother give the money."

"In that case, duchess, we are all forced to lower our flags to you. Yours the victory, yours the triumph. Be merciful, I beg you. Sound the trumpet."

"How is it possible," resumed the duchess, taking no notice of the irony, "for you to draw back for a wretched five hundred thousand livres when it is a question of sparing you — I beg your pardon; I mean your friend, or, rather, your protector — the disagreeable outcome of a party contest?"

"Duchess, this is my reason: After the five hundred thousand livres have been given you, M. de Laicques will ask for his share, which will be another five hundred thousand livres, will it not? And after M. de Laicques' share and

your own there will still be that of your children, your poor pensioners, and various other people. The letters, compromising as they may be, will not be worth from three to four millions. By the rood, duchess! The diamonds of the Queen of France are worth more than those figures signed by Mazarin, and yet their recovery did not cost a quarter of what you ask for yourself."

"All that is very true, but the merchant puts his own price on his goods. The customer buys or not as he pleases."

"Wait a moment, duchess. Should you like me to tell you why I will not buy your letters?"

"Yes."

"Your letters from Mazarin are forgeries."

"The idea!"

"What I say is true, for it would at least be strange that, after quarrelling with the queen through M. Mazarin, you should have kept up any intimacy with the latter. It would smack of passion, espionage, and of — indeed, I do not like to use the word."

"Say it."

"Complaisance."

"That is all quite true, but the letters are none the less genuine."

"I swear to you, duchess, that they will not serve you with the queen."

"Oh, yes, I can make use of everything with the queen."

"Very good," thought Aramis, "chatter on, magpie; hiss away, viper!"

But the duchess had said enough, and started towards the door.

Aramis had reserved for her one humiliation — the curse which the vanquished is heard to utter behind the triumphal chariot. He rang a bell. Candles appeared in the room, and the bishop found himself in the midst of lights which shone upon the worn-out face of the duchess. Aramis fixed a long, ironical look upon her pale, withered cheeks, upon her dull eyes, her mouth, carefully closed over teeth, now few and blackened.

He threw himself into a graceful attitude, with his proud and intelligent head thrown back, smiling to show his teeth, which in the light shone with a sort of brilliancy. The aged coquette understood the trick of the gallant. She was stand-

ing directly in front of a large mirror in which all her decrepitude, so carefully concealed, was made the more manifest by the contrast. Then, without even saluting Aramis, who bowed with the charming ease of the musketeer of earlier days, she hurried away with trembling steps, impeded still more by her haste.

Aramis glided across the room like a zephyr to lead her to the door.

Madame de Chevreuse made a sign to her servant, who resumed his musket. Thus she left the house in which two such tender friends had not understood each other because they had understood each other too well.
